ISSN 1560-7607 / ISBN 978-99950-52-05-8

CAMBODIA DEVELOPMENT REVIEW

A publication of CDRI—Cambodia's leading independent development policy research institute

VOLUME 18, ISSUE 2 JUNE 2014 $4.00

ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN THE STATE AND CAMBODIAN RESEARCHERS

Introduction

Cambodia has undergone significant changes since the United Nations organised the first general election in 1993, which paved the way for many transformations. Cambodia has moved from war to peace, from planned socialist to free-market economy, and from one party to multi-party democracy, although the quality of each of these externally driven changes and transitions continues to be debated. One important change during the past decades has been the growth in scholarly writing and research about Cambodia by researchers from that country. Still, this kind of indigenous research is rare compared with some countries in the region. Furthermore, its contribution to and influence over policy and decision-making processes within the state has been limited, as has information available to the Cambodian public on social, economic and political issues.

The Development Research Forum Symposium brings together around 250 emerging and established Cambodian researchers to share recent research findings, generate critical feedback and discussion, and consider policy implications for Cambodia's future, Phnom Penh, October 2013

The research by Cambodians in Cambodia is mostly used by and accessible to foreign researchers and Cambodians living outside the country. On the one hand, Cambodian researchers have many advantages in conducting and interpreting long-term and well-grounded research studies in their own country, and are making important contributions to Cambodia's academia, currently dominated by foreigners. On the other, they face considerable challenges in both doing the actual research and in making a living as researchers.

This article assesses the state of social research and the constraints faced by Cambodian researchers since the end of the Khmer Rouge period by examining the interface between the politics of state building and the relationship of researchers to the existing power structure. While previous works have provided valuable contributions to the discussion about the state of research in Cambodia, they tend to focus on the institutional and cultural factors in explaining the underdevelopment of social

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Prepared by Dr Eng Netra, research fellow and programme coordinator, Democratic Governance and Public Sector Reform Programme, CDRI. This may be cited as: Eng Netra (2014), "Engagement between the State and Cambodian Researchers", *Cambodia Development Review,* 18(2):1–5.

research. In this review, however, I argue that the nature and the character of the problems Cambodian researchers and Cambodia's research institutions have faced and continue to face are intrinsically linked to the approaches and requirements of state building efforts over the last thirty years. From this perspective, change and the future direction of social research in Cambodia cannot be understood simply by looking at the technical and institutional problems without addressing the political aspects facing Cambodian researchers.

The Politics of State Building and its Impacts on Cambodian Researchers

In examining the state of research and the constraints faced by Cambodian researchers, it is necessary to contextualise the roles of researchers and research institutions in the state-building process in Cambodia since the end of the Khmer Rouge period. After the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, a new government led by the People's Revolution Party of Kampuchea (later changed to the Cambodian People's Party) was formed by the Vietnamese authorities after their invasion of Cambodia at the end of 1978. The new government faced enormous challenges in rebuilding a country burdened with a shattered economy, a violent and traumatised society, disintegrated state institutions and isolation from the West.

In the 1980s, Cambodian leaders focussed on restoring the bureaucracy, establishing the party's authority from the centre down to the local level, and managing insurgent threats posed by the remaining Khmer Rouge and their allies operating from safe havens in Thailand (Chandler 1991; Grant 1998). During this period, the Cambodian government relied extensively on its Vietnamese counterpart for advice and funding as well as protection in the every-day affairs of the state. Evan Gottsman's *After the Khmer Rouge* documented some revealing insights of the policy and decision-making process inside the Cambodian state at the time. According to Gottsman, the policy process was characterised by top-down decision making and lack of consultation and transparency; a very small group was given huge discretionary power over policy and action (Gottesman 2005:247–253). More importantly, decisions and policies reflected the regime's patrimonial interests rather than legal and rational considerations.

Such undemocratic decision-making processes were actively promoted by Cambodia's top leaders, who remain in power today: they justified them as necessary due to the country's situation at the time. Officials at the implementation level, particularly those at subnational levels, were given authority to do "what fitted" in their respective locations as long as they maintained close personal relations with their respective patrons and generated the economic rents necessary to support their network. For instance, Gottsman (2005:233) shows that a number of government socialist-inspired policies such as the K5 project[1] ended up creating and supporting a large system of patronage networks running through the central ministries, military and local authorities. Official efforts at the time mainly focused on generating and eliciting personal benefits from state policies and activities at the expense of building and instituting state capacity to implement rules-based policy and decisions in the interest of the population at large (Ayres 2000; Hughes 2003). The practice was effective from the perspective of the government: not only did it assist the survival of the regime but it also served the interests of the party and its leaders, who constituted the government.

This state of affairs persisted throughout the 1990s and until today, despite interventions by the international donors who entered the country after the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) which took power alongside the Cambodian government under the Paris Peace Agreement of 1991 (Hughes 2003; Un 2005). International technical advisers and resources poured into Cambodia in the early 1990s from the West in relief efforts to rebuild the country. Yet these efforts were often stymied by local politics.

A study on *State Building in Cambodia* by Sok Say in the fisheries and forestry sectors finds that although the capacity of the Cambodian state has been slowly improving since 1993, it remains weak in many aspects where "[E]xtraction from the state through the capture by businesses and citizens in

[1] K5 project was implemented between 1985–89 as a labour-intensive effort of the People's Republic of Kampuchea regime to protect the Thai–Cambodian border through putting up trenches and bamboo fences and planting minefields.

general and interference from politicians on behalf and in favor of their clients into the affairs of the 'bureaucracy' and state agencies is common" (Sok 2012: 301). Likewise, in her book *Dependent Communities,* Caroline Hughes shows how local elites in the post-conflict aid-dependent contexts of East Timor and Cambodia coped and devised strategies to appear to comply with the demands imposed by international donors while at the same time maintaining their discretionary actions (Hughes 2009). The Cambodian leaders succeeded in achieving this objective, according to Hughes, by moving real decision-making power from state institutions into the CPP's personal network of trusted and loyal individuals, away from the influence and participation of international donors and the Cambodian public. Policy and decision making became elitist and secretive.

Consequently, policy and decision-making activities are not expected to involve the sharing of ideas with experts in the field. Rather than being generated by public debate between representatives of different groups, experts and political affiliations, decision making and policy development are entirely at the discretion of Cambodia's top political leaders and within the CPP's patronage network. Despite the fact that the combined opposition parties have consistently won between 39 and 49 percent of the vote in national elections since 1993, they remain marginalised in key decision-making processes.

To this end, decision making in Cambodia has always been subordinated to the interests of the regime's patronage network. This means that researchers and research institutions have little room and ability to set policymaking agenda and to participate in and influence decision-making processes. Nor does the Cambodian state and its leadership value the contribution and potential roles played by local researchers as far as the processes of state building and policymaking are concerned. However, it is important to note that there are exceptions and that variation exists between policy areas depending on the nature of the policy area and the vested interests involved.[2]

[2] Hughes and Conway (2003) have documented decision- and policymaking processes in Cambodia and showed the different outcomes of such processes in various policy areas from service delivery to resource-intensive sectors.

'Cambodian Culture' as Obstacle to the Development of Research Capacity in Cambodia?

This patrimonial approach to state building has significantly affected relations between the state and researchers and academic institutions in Cambodia, and the capacity of local researchers and research institutions, as will be discussed below. However, these real effects have been underestimated and often ignored in the existing literature about the development of research capacities in Cambodia. A recent report by a group of Cambodian and foreign researchers, commissioned by a consortium of local research centres called the Cambodia Development Research Forum, is a good example. In describing the challenges facing research institutions, universities and Cambodian researchers, the report notes "lack of adequate budget", "lack of facilities and infrastructure", and "lack of research culture" (Kwok et al. 2010). The report repeatedly attributes the barriers facing researchers and research institutions in Cambodia to "the lack of research culture" (Kwok et al: 29, 34). Such views are shared by other studies assessing the status of research in Cambodia (Pit and Ford 2004; Chet 2009). Frequently, "Cambodian culture", described as an innate tendency to accept hierarchy, intolerance of differences, passivity and lack of inquisitive traits, is used in the literature to explain the shortcomings of Cambodia's democratisation process, civil society development, and participatory governance, to name a few.

Surely, "cultural" factors have also come under scrutiny in other Southeast Asian countries. Duncan McCargo, for example, argues that the shortage of research and publications in Southeast Asia by local researchers is mainly due to "academic cultures" in the region where professional standing and reputation of researchers "has little to do with an active engagement with new research" (McCargo 2006:111). Other scholars disagree and argue that the development of research capacities in these countries is directly connected to historical legacy, the exercise of state power and particular development paths (Zeleza 2002; Hadiz and Dhakidae 2005; Goh 2011). For instance, Hadiz and Dahkidae have attributed the "poverty" of social science research in Indonesia to "the pragmatic and instrumental nature of the bureaucratised social sciences", which continue to be co-opted by the state in promoting particular agenda (2005:17).

In Cambodia, while "lack of resources", "lack of institutional support" and "lack of infrastructure" may be seen as technical and institutional issues, access to resources, facilities, infrastructure, and institutional arrangements conducive to research career and capacity development are all the result of political decisions about who gets what, when and how. Actually, strengthening critical research-based capacity is not at all the priority of the government and its ruling party, whose political legitimacy and strategy continue to focus on "its ability to get things done" through their preferred patrimonial governance and populist strategy of highly politicised rural development programmes. In this context, the kinds of contributions and capacity needed and desired by the regime are much more about mobilising resources and moving them to deliver the CPP's sponsored infrastructure projects in exchange for political support in rural areas. The result has been "almost complete absence of government funding" and appreciation for research in Cambodia (Chet 2009:161).

Co-optation of Cambodian Researchers into the State

Not only are Cambodian researchers subjected to political and economic marginalisation, they are being increasingly co-opted into the state bureaucracy and the CPP's personal network. Gottsman shows that well-educated people and intellectuals have been coerced to toe the state and party lines and subjected to constant scrutiny over their political loyalty (Gottesman 2005:348). These practices persist as political and economic power continue to be consolidated into the hands of Cambodia's leaders and their loyal network at the top of the CPP's structure (Heder 2005; Hughes and Kheang 2011; Pak 2011; Un 2011).

Indeed, an elaborate system of honours and titles has been established by the government and is currently used to award individuals within the bureaucracy, military, civil society and the business sector who are willing to support and contribute to the government and the CPP's agenda. For example, the appointment and promotion of public university presidents and senior academic personnel is decided by the government, and is much less related to their academic performance than to their personal connection with and backing from high-ranking government officials (Chet 2009:159). Despite the fact that more well-trained and educated personnel are being recruited and promoted into the state bureaucracy they have limited influence in the way decisions and policies are developed and implemented as the recruitment strategy is intended to secure the loyalty and support of the educated and professional class. Because of this, research studies that are considered too sensitive and might not be tolerated by the state rarely get done or published in Cambodia. The result has been to emphasise pragmatic and policy-related research rather than engage in substantive and critical research.

The Roles and Influence of International Donors on Cambodia's Social Research

The critical discussion on the state of research above is not to suggest that all Cambodian researchers are co-opted by the authorities or that no critical research is being done in Cambodia. In fact, outside of the state institutions and public universities, critical and independent research is being conducted by Cambodians. This is made possible through support and resources from international donors. Indeed, international donors have played very important and influential roles in setting research priorities, building research capacity, and mobilising the policy recommendations and actions arising from research findings.

One example is the Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI), which was set up in 1990 as an independent development research organisation to provide policy research outputs on Cambodia's development priorities. All of its 36 researchers are Cambodians many of whom hold master's and doctoral degrees from overseas, reflecting an important change in research capacity in Cambodia. This high number of well-trained researchers enables the institute to conduct quality research studies in disciplines from economics and agriculture to governance and public sector reform. Over the years, CDRI has published widely about the state of development in Cambodia and has led many ongoing public forums within Cambodia and the region as an arena for public debate about Cambodia's future. In many ways, CDRI is independent and has been able to carry out research studies that are critical of the government's policy and ways of functioning because the institute is governed by a board of directors consisting of Cambodians and foreigners. CDRI's independent and quality work has also been

maintained as a requisite for getting funds from international donors, which currently constitute the major source of revenue for CDRI's operations and research activities.

More recently, a number of research institutions and centres have been established to take advantage of the growing research and consultancy needs in Cambodia. In fact, a great deal of literature, albeit of highly variable quality and rarely published, is being produced within this domain of the consultancy business. The abundance of consultancy work in Cambodia, emphasising immediate policy research, has had significant implications for the scarce existing research capacity as well as for institution building. Talented researchers are being absorbed into well-paid consultancy work. Research institutions, both public and private, are drawn into prioritising "consultancy research" as part of their core activities in order to survive (Kwok et al. 2010). Experience in other countries shows that where the foundations for solid and rigorous research capacity and practice have not been firmly established, the heavy reliance and emphasis on consultancy research further weaken rather than strengthen the quality and capacity of universities and researchers for long-term research and capacity development (Hadiz and Dhakidae 2005; McCargo 2006).

Conclusion

This paper has reflected on key constraints facing Cambodian researchers doing research in Cambodia. The political, economic and social transformations observed in recent years have opened up space for the development of research capacity and critical voices where Cambodian scholars themselves are given support and opportunities to do careful research. This promising but currently weak standing of Cambodian researchers in the Cambodian study and in the international literature could be explained by reference to the structural constraints faced by Cambodian researchers both in terms of doing the actual research as well as pursuing a serious research career.

Being a Cambodian and doing research in Cambodia, and speaking and knowing the local language and customs, immensely helps researchers in collecting data and information. Cambodian researchers are better able to gain the trust of informants to speak frankly, and better able to perceive what is actually happening on the ground than are foreign researchers hindered by lesser language skills and less knowledge of local practices. But, of course, this may make Cambodian researchers suspect in the eyes of those in authority who wish to conceal what they are doing. Because Cambodian leaders continue to dominate and protect their patron-client relationships through the use of hierarchical and personal networks in setting agendas and making decisions, government funding and support for research institutions is very limited and critical voices are rarely supported. Under such conditions, research in Cambodia has primarily been financed by foreign aid and international organisations and is likely to depend on them for the foreseeable future.

However, the state of research in Cambodia is only slowly changing. Compared with twenty years ago, the number of Cambodian graduates with post graduate degrees has been steadily increasing, many of whom have been doing social research. Nonetheless, the future direction of Cambodia's social research requires more than just the number of local researchers with master's and doctoral degrees. It is more about creating and providing local researchers with an enabling social, political and economic environment that promotes appreciation, autonomy and creative thinking of researchers and research institutions in Cambodia.

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