20 Years' Strengthening of Cambodian Civil Society: Time for Reflection

Introduction

After more than 20 years of international efforts to enhance the progressive realisation of economic, social and cultural rights, the important question naturally arises whether a strong, unifying civil society has been achieved. Careful consideration of this question stimulates thoughtful discussion, and the answer is a mixed one at best. Civil society at the national level remains weak, while a more vigorous civil society appears to be emerging from the grassroots.

The discussion first clarifies a key point of contention about whether non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society are implicitly the same, and then examines the concept of Cambodian organic civil society. An overview of the NGO phenomenon follows, identifying participatory NGOs, who supports them and why. Lastly, we look at the evolution of NGOs over the last two decades, with a focus on whether they constitute and to what extent they have improved civil society, and the impacts of recent movements to fan out NGOs to almost every corner of the country on grassroots civil society.

Are NGOs and civil society implicitly the same?

Despite wide use of the term civil society, its definition remains unclear. Commentators conclude that the concept itself is vague and therefore often empirically elusive. A widely quoted liberal definition promoted by the donor community in Cambodia and elsewhere refers to civil society as "… an intermediate associational realm between state and family populated by organizations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values" (White 1994, 337-338). This definition accentuates several crucial points. First, civil society is the aggregate of organisations within the realm of autonomous, voluntary associations. Second, the domain protects organisations' collective interests. Third, it represents organic and voluntary actions as self-expression flourishes and more people pull together to achieve certain objectives, particularly in making demands on the state to respond to those objectives. A point worth emphasising is that the definition reflects the general structure and common characteristics of a Western civil society.

Does Cambodia possess its own form of civil society? Civil society does exist in the country but it is distinct from the Western form. Even before war erupted, May Ebihara (1968) argued that Cambodian civil society did not constitute organisational bodies that connected them and the state, but was manifested in various forms of social exchange, or reciprocity, influenced and supported by institutions of kinship and familiarity. If one looks closely, Cambodian civil society centres on pagodas and associated groups largely performing religious, social and developmental roles, rather than on collective (political) representation or social movements and interest groups' articulation of their views to the state to resolve matters of their concern.

In efforts to empower Cambodian civil society, Western donor circles since the early 1990s have supported local NGOs. At the time it was envisioned that civil society in Cambodia could be strengthened beyond traditional indigenous social relations to play a more crucial political role in shifting the balance of power. Ideally, this would ultimately underpin good governance. Another vital role of NGOs was to provide the basic social services not being assured by the public sector due to the weak capacity of the state.

Similar to the notion of civil society, the term NGO is also subject to some ambiguity. Clarke (1998, 2-3) defined NGOs as "… private, non-profit, professional organizations with a distinctive legal character, concerned with public welfare goals." NGOs represent professional organisations and

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primarily exist as a "means" or "agent" intending to achieve public goals and empower civil society in developing countries (Clarke 1998). In this sense, their role as the means of achieving others' ends implies that NGOs have already deviated from the general definition of civil society because civil society activities and organisations are formed for the benefit of their members. NGOs' lack of grassroots connection or popular support base and their upward accountability to donors further indicate that they do not constitute civil society.

The latest census puts the number of operating civil society organisations (referred to here as NGOs) in 2012 at 1315, of which 1130 (86 percent) had funding (CCC 2013, 7). Another recent phenomenon in Cambodia is hybrid civil society, referring to subnational NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs), which number around 25,000. They are classified as hybrid because of the coexistence of local, state and foreign interests embedded in them. These civil society bodies are often formed out of the interests of the local people, but usually gain support from NGOs.

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To what extent have NGOs strengthened civil society?

At national level, especially in the 1990s, donors have generally funded a specific group of NGOs, especially large organisations with strong potential and a good track record rather than broader civil society groups such as trade unions, to ensure that expected outcomes are measureable and justify their support. Some scholars go as far as arguing that collective action for social betterment has been badly served by donors' funding decisions, a phenomenon Hughes (2009) calls the "atomizing strategies" of aid donors. That "…the promotion of civil society has, in policy terms, continued to focus on the creation of NGOs rather than broader forms of associations" is echoed by Christie (2013, 91), while an empirical study by the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia has identified NGOs' upward accountability as a key issue: "Most accountability practices are predominantly upward … As most NGOs are donor dependent, their decision making, not unexpectedly, [is] influenced greatly by their donors/development partners. In defining strategic focus or directions ... the priority concerns or issues of communities become secondary to donor priorities and agenda" (CCC 2010, 31-32).

Donors' results-driven aid portfolios mostly prioritise completion of projects and focus less on their impact (R.F. Catalla and T. Catalla 2001) let alone on strengthening civil society in general. Consequently, NGOs barely connect with the grassroots or a popular base, leaving the locals disorganised and even less empowered. NGOs, overall, provide high-paying jobs to an educated urban elite who spend more time working in the capital and major cities than on connecting with local people. Some NGOs are affected by endemic corruption and others lack good governance and transparency. Also, it is not uncommon for NGOs to be established with the principal objective of making profit: "Some NGOs were still being set up for employment purposes rather than assisting the poor" (Nowaczyk 2009, 25). The inadequacy of organisations' democratic principles undermines their credibility and effectiveness in promoting broader civil society organisations and movements.

In spite of the early concentration of NGOs in the capital and major cities, the persistence of that trend and the undeniable constraints on their operations, a new phenomenon has gradually emerged. At the local level, from the mid-2000s onwards, NGOs have fanned out to the countryside and CBOs, often with support from NGOs, have established a presence in almost every village; commentators refer to this as a hybrid phenomenon (see, for example, Öjendal 2014). On the one hand, this CBO phenomenon has occurred with such problems as elite capture and uncertain sustainability due to financial dependence on NGOs and donors. On the other, some positives that have not been present before are slowly unfolding: the Cambodianisation of civil society (i.e. the shifting of interests from the internationals to the locals), and the emergence of intermediary institutions. These recent developments have led to the strong emergence of certain groups, notably thousands of savings groups: CEDAC alone has

reportedly set up 3000 successful savings groups. These and other groups have sprung up around the country, a phenomenon unprecedented in the shaping of Cambodia's modern civil society.

A detailed ethnographic case study (Hiwasa 2014) argues that donors' efforts to establish savings groups in rural Cambodia have paid off, resulting in many functioning groups that have economically and socially empowered the local people, especially women. Before the arrival of these informal savings groups, the situation of women could be likened to that of "frogs in a well". Today, women's collective action realised through their engagement in savings groups has helped them attain the capacity to participate directly in the public realm and civil society. Further, women's savings groups have become a breeding ground for building social and group networks, reaching out to the district and even national levels and providing a platform for woman to voice their concerns (Hiwasa 2014). Another study on microfinance (Jörgensen 2009) confirms that despite failures, donors' efforts to promote local savings groups have produced successful groups that have generated increased social capital and other positive empowerment effects. An evaluation of a CEDAC-supported farmer livelihood project points out the rapid spread and vigour of farmer, producer and savings groups: "An often quoted study of Cambodian rural life is titled 'When Every Household Is an Island'. The farmers in Tram Kok are showing how rapidly this title may become history"(Johnsen and Prom 2005, 2).

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The positive effects of the international community's efforts to build a grassroots civil society in Cambodia are acknowledged in that it "… has succeeded in triggering local capacity and a will to organize … permeating a fair share of the civil society realm", and it has in a sense created a space for "an intermediate associational realm"(Öjendal 2014, 35). Despite their predominantly economic objectives, CBOs have collective political power (Feuer 2014). Recent analysis of CEDAC's community development strategies through the formation of farmer associations reveals that at the local level, a producer group as small as 10 households could be sufficient to mobilise local action in response to threats, whether environmental (e.g. floods, epidemics) or political (e.g. land grabbing, predatory traders or even corruption) (Feuer 2014, 246). At the local level, the empowerment of rural groups (such as the Cambodian Farmer Association Federation of Agricultural Producers), through increased capacity for collective action, provides important leverage over the government's use of co-optation and threats: "While the Farmers' Association has maintained very amicable relationships with the government … the existence of large rural organisations is already an initial challenge to the monopoly of state authority in the countryside" (Feuer 2014, 246). Further, the proliferation of local women's savings groups and networks may well have contributed from a long-term perspective to the groundswell of grassroots movements that Feuer has pointed out.

A unique case is that of the Khmer Community for Agricultural Development (KCAD), a provincial NGO established 20 years ago in Kampot.[1] KCAD represents a genuine civil society organisation that could not have emerged without donor support. In the critical early stages, KCAD relied on external support but later generated its own income, albeit sporadic, through organising equipment operator training courses. What makes KCAD fit the definition of civil society is that its autonomy has allowed the organisation to carve its own space and fulfill its goals in the civil society sphere. Now well established, KCAD continues to operate independently of government; the director earns his living from other means but satisfies his philanthropic interests through part-time involvement in the organisation's activities. On another front, NGOs such as Hagar and Friends International have transformed themselves into social businesses, allowing them to generate sustainable income and generally stick to their agenda in helping marginalised groups such as poor

1 Other cases may exist elsewhere but lie beyond the study's scope of investigation.

students and orphans. It is clear, however, that the transformation from NGO to social business (again, a hybrid form of civil society) could not happen without initial support from external interveners.

Conclusion

Donors' efforts to strengthen civil society in Cambodia have produced mixed outcomes. At the national level, NGOs, especially in the early days, have barely empowered civil society. Two key challenges stand out. First, the demands of external donors for not only upward but also a specific type of accountability concentrate funding on a small group of select NGOs, creating a disconnect between the NGOs and the prioritisation of the local beneficiaries they are supposed to serve. Second, problems within the NGOs themselves undermine their credibility and effectiveness. Although these constraints will not melt away easily given NGOs' considerable dependence on external support, their work has increasingly reached out to the rural areas, gradually moving towards connection with the grassroots. Since the mid-2000s, more NGOs have extended their project activities to the countryside, establishing in the process hundreds of thousands of hybrid civil society groups especially savings groups. These encouraging trends lend hope to the idea that civil society at the lowest level has the potential to grow and to have distinct political relevance.

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