

Mismatch between Local Needs and District Councillors' Perceptions of Development Priorities: Results from the 2011 Dissemination Workshop¹

Introduction

As part of the dissemination of its research findings and a way to meaningfully engage a broad range of stakeholders, CDRI's Democratic Governance and Public Sector Reform (DGPSR) Programme organised the third Dissemination Workshop in October 2011 to discuss and seek recommendations regarding the progress and challenges of Decentralisation and Deconcentration (D&D) Reform. Attended by approximately 300 participants—central and local government officials, representatives from NGOs, civil society organisations and the private sector—the workshop entailed panel and group discussions on commune, district and provincial councils' governance and development planning. A remarkable result from the discussions was the marked mismatch between local needs as articulated by commune councillors and the priority development needs perceived by district councillors. This article discusses this mismatch: section 1 describes commune councils' on-the-ground needs, section 2 looks at district councils' development agenda and why their priorities differ from those of commune councils, and section 3 presents some implications deriving from the mismatch.

On-the-ground Situation and Needs Raised by Commune Councils

Commune councillors reported that basic social services such as education and healthcare are the most immediate needs in their areas of jurisdiction, followed by natural resources management, environment protection and gender issues.

Commune councils have achieved a lot in the education sector. Through the Commune Committee for Women and Children (CCWC), the councils have collaborated with schools by regularly collecting data on and monitoring the school attendance and

drop-out rates of children aged 3-6 years, and encouraging those who have dropped out to return to school. They have also promoted the importance of education among parents, and financially supported poor children to attend school. As a result, more children have been able to go to school and dropout rates have declined. However, some problems remain, including the absenteeism of teachers and lack of schools and community kindergartens.

Health services provision and healthcare facilities have also been improved through the commune councils' efforts. For example, they have promoted information among parents on child vaccinations, constructed special maternity waiting/recovery rooms for women, and disseminated advice on antenatal care specifically to encourage women to have routine health checks and give birth at health centres. As a result, maternal and child mortality rates have gradually decreased. Those living in remote areas, however, still face many health challenges. Lack of medicine, medical equipment and trained clinicians, the few and distant health centres, and violation of medical ethics make it difficult for people to access medical care when they are seriously ill or when women suffer post-natal complications.

The commune councils have brought the priority needs of their constituencies to the attention of the district councils and line departments. To improve education, for instance, they have called for the construction of more public community kindergartens, primary and junior high schools, especially in remote areas, and asked line departments and NGOs to help strengthen the availability and commitment of teaching staff. For better community healthcare, the commune councils have requested that one local health centre be provided in each commune/*sangkat* and that health staff be on standby, have better work ethics in terms of offering a public service and being helpful to patients. They have also asked line departments to run more education campaigns on maternal and child health so that good health practices can be

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better and more widely promoted and awareness raised.

In response to concerns about natural resources and environment matters, the commune councils have disseminated information on the law and associated legal documents to raise their constituents' awareness of these issues. However, land grabbing, illegal fishing and encroachment onto flooded land, forest and river banks have been rampant. These activities have caused flooding and depleted forest and fishery resources, affecting community livelihoods. Yet all the commune councils could do was just report the offences to line departments, leaving councillors frustrated by the lack of financial resources and authority to intervene, especially when they had received numerous complaints. What the commune councils need then is the necessary mandate to intervene in natural resource and environment issues that affect their constituents' well-being.

As for raising the profile of women in local governance, despite the integration of gender issues into planning, dissemination of information and monitoring and evaluation, a lot remains to be done. For example, the number of girls attending school has been shrinking – the higher the grade, the fewer the number of female students; girls' responsibility for household chores and parents' perception of the importance of a daughter's education were reported to be the main reasons behind this. There continues to be a shortage of women in local politics, especially in decision-making and high ranking positions. Men generally do not support or encourage their wives to work outside the home, let alone enter local politics. Moreover, the opportunities for women to participate in local politics are largely restricted by the political party list quota. To address these issues, the commune councillors expect the district councillors and line departments to first, help with developing the capacity of the CCWC; second, simplify legal procedures to create space within the budget to accommodate expenditure on addressing women's issues; and third, be more active and supportive by sending technical officials to participate in CCWC committee meetings.

Development Agenda of Provincial/District Councils

Although most of the commune councils' needs and expectations of the district councils are valid, there is little the latter can do to respond effectively

to the demands made upon them. The first three-year Implementation Plan (IP3) of the 10-year National Programme for Sub-national Democratic Development 2010-19 (NP-SNDD) stipulates that the District Council is the institution responsible for local services delivery and providing support to commune councils. However, the district councillors' perceptions of development priorities showed otherwise. Although commune council development plans have been incorporated into the district councils' five-year development plan and three-year rolling investment programme, the district councils have prioritised mainly physical infrastructure, specifically rural road construction, relegating as a secondary concern the much needed non-physical infrastructure such as the health and education services and facilities requested by the communes.

The disparity between district and commune councils' development priorities has happened for a number of reasons. First, financial constraints appear to be one of the main problems that district councils face. So far they have not been allocated any budget from central government to finance their local development agenda, except for minor development funds and some support from the District Initiative (DI) Project². The IP3 stipulates that sub-national administrations, including district councils, are not eligible for their District/Municipal (D/M) Fund until the requisite five-year development plan and three-year rolling programme are underway (RGC 2009; Pak *et al.* 2011).

Second, that the roles and responsibilities of the commune and district councils are poorly defined seems to be a contributing factor to the differing development priorities in local planning. District councillors have not yet assumed the new mandate for district councils as outlined in the IP3, and still cling to an "outmoded" mindset concerning their roles and responsibilities, accountability line and attitude towards the communes. They defended their development priorities, saying there was nothing wrong with their focus on road construction as the inter-commune scope of their responsibilities is

² The District Initiative Project to support districts was established by the MoI in 2006 with assistance from the Project to Support Democratic Development through Decentralisation and Deconcentration and the Natural Resource Management and Livelihood Project (NCDD 2009). Each district receives USD20,000-30,000 a year for local and inter-commune development (interview with NCDD official, 18 May 2011).

much broader than that of the commune councillors who have only their constituents to look after. The district officials also perceived that the delivery of basic social services such as health and education is within line office and line departments' mandates, not the district councils'.

Institutionally, although district officials were elected by the commune councils in 2009, the district officials' "old mentality" about their downward accountability line has remained unchanged. This observation has been validated by CDRI's 2011 special survey report on local officials' understanding of the many aspects³ of D&D Reform (Chheat *et al.* 2011). The report suggests that instead of being accountable to the communes who elected them to office, the districts see themselves as being downwardly accountable to the people and upwardly accountable to central government, especially the Ministry of Interior (MoI) (*ibid.*). Likewise, as raised during the workshop discussions, when asked who they are accountable to in their roles and responsibilities the district councillors responded that they are downwardly accountable to citizens and upwardly accountable to provincial and central government. This claim is not surprising if we look at the historical development of the country's public administration.

Historically, Cambodia's administrative system has been extremely centralised and hierarchical until at least the 1993 election (Kim & Öjendal 2008). District officials thus developed a strong sense of hierarchy and were accountable mainly to provincial authorities and the ruling party (*ibid.*), whereas downward accountability of the district to the commune has been almost absent. Kim and Öjendal's (*ibid.*) study confirms these roles of the districts, noting that 81.81 percent of district officials think they have authority over the communes, while only 2.59 percent believe they are subordinate to the communes (*ibid.*: 27). It was also observed that the communes had demanded (i) that the districts pay attention to local needs for service delivery, and (ii) wider development strategies to contribute better to rural development (*ibid.*: 27; Kim & Öjendal 2006).

The lack of communication between commune and district councils makes it hard for them to reconcile their differing development agendas. This

is also confirmed by the 2011 survey report and recent study on decentralisation at district/municipal level (Chheat *et al.* 2011; Pak *et al.* 2011): both observe that communication between these two tiers of local government is still very limited.

Overall, the absence of district councils' development budget for both local development and support for the communes, poor communication and unclear institutional provision of roles and responsibilities between the communes and districts are what constitute the mismatch in local development priorities. This then raises the question of the potential implications of this mismatch.

Implications for Future Development

Lack of clarity about the commune and district councils' roles, responsibilities and accountability line, limited budget and poor communication in development planning will likely have the following implications for future development.

District councils' inability to access permanent development budget because they lack financial resources to implement their five-year development plan and three-year rolling programme in order to be eligible for the D/M Fund implies there is dire need for the D/M Fund to be secured in a way that allows district councils to fulfil their expected roles as stipulated in IP3 of NP-SNDD 2010-19. The absence of a development budget for the district councils also implies that the transfer of functions and resources from national to local level remains an issue.

The availability of a development budget for the district councils and their ability to take on the clear set of roles and responsibilities assigned by central government are interdependent. More specifically, the district councils cannot carry out their mandated functions effectively unless the D/M Fund is made available. District councillors' administrative and management capacity needs to be developed so they can fulfil their roles in regulating and coordinating the delivery of basic services and extending support to the communes.

The absence of a clear division of roles and responsibilities and accountability line between the district and commune councils implies the following (Chheat *et al.* 2011). First, the slow process of functional reassignment—councils are waiting to be assigned clear roles and responsibilities from central government—will continue to constrain district and

³ These aspects include accountability, fiscal assignment, services delivery, division of labour between communes and districts, gender issues, unified administration and overall reform.