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EMERGING CHALLENGES OF CAMBODIA'S LOCAL GOVERNMENT: RESOURCE MOBILISATION, LOCAL INITIATIVE AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

The aim of this article is to stimulate discussion around emerging challenges facing local governments in Cambodia. The challenges identified represent their continued struggle to meet statutory responsibilities and expectations and adapt to their roles in the context of rapid changes at local government level since decentralisation reform began in 2002. Most prominent is the increasingly difficult task of matching the expectations created by mandates with the political capacity and ability to fulfil them. This problem is accentuated by the fact that local actors are demanded by various governance reforms to be more responsive and accountable to local citizens before they are adequately equipped with authority, resources and support.

The article begins by describing the dynamic relationship between the evolution of local government roles and higher expectations of public services, and how their juxtaposition widens the gap between political accountability and capacity. It then briefly discusses closing the gap as a critical prerequisite for accountable and responsive local governance. That is followed by identification and discussion of how local actors in Cambodia are attempting to fill the gap and the challenges

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Local authorities from various provinces around the Tonle Sap visit the coastal provinces to learn about climate change adaptation planning. Koh Kong, Feb 2016

they encounter. Some final policy suggestions conclude.

Changing local context: Expectations and local government capacity

Decentralisation reform, which is envisioned by its advocates to promote democratisation, local development and eventually reduce poverty,

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has brought about significant changes to the subnational governance structure in Cambodia (Rusten et al. 2004). Since the first commune council elections in 2002, the commune has taken on a more meaningful role in local development, a marked change from its previous primary emphasis on maintaining security and social order after the end of the Khmer Rouge regime. Decentralisation reform has also established a base for the commune council to build its legitimacy and created space for representatives from different parties to work together (Öjendal and Kim 2013). Administratively, the reform has put in place framework for local participatory development processes, including project prioritisation, procurement and financial management, which enable councils to respond to local needs and enhance accountability for local decision making.

The commune still has very limited functional and resource assignments, however. These shortcomings require the scaling up of decentralisation at intermediate (provincial and district) levels (RGC 2005; Pak 2011). The government, with support from international development partners, expanded decentralisation reform to district and provincial level with the first indirect election of district and provincial councils in 2009 and recently in 2014. Indirectly elected councils with councillors from different political parties and women are now in place. New institutions and structures such as boards of governors and various district offices have been established to carry out the policies and decisions of the councils. The boards of governors are membered by a governor and several deputy governors, only one of whom is a woman. The districts also have their own budgets that they can use to implement district-level participatory development plans in response to local needs.

The district is now the focus of the ongoing decentralisation reform as outlined in the 10-year National Program on Sub-National Democratic Development 2010-2019. The government wants to reshape the district from an administrative coordination hub into a decisive level of government able to promote local economic development and deliver services that commune councils, given their small size and administrative limitations, are unable to provide. This shift involves commune councils presenting demands from their constituencies to which districts will then respond. The district

also has a responsibility to support communes in implementing their work, to monitor and check the legality of commune decisions, and to provide capacity building for commune councils.

CDRI research on decentralisation reform and local governance documents three important changes in local governance. First, decentralisation has paved the way for the emergence of new actors and voices and hence a certain level of political pluralism in local politics. In most communes and districts, there are council members from oppositional political parties and women councillors. The pressure of the commune's direct election extends further to the political party system whereby the parties have to restructure themselves to be effective and efficient at the grassroots level by identifying competent candidates to win votes (Thon et al. 2009). At the district level, there are officials in the administration who represent Cambodia's post-war generation and are relatively well educated compared to district councillors who are mostly retired civil servants (Eng 2014).

Second, the reorganisation of the structure and accountability of local government (namely commune and district) has been observed to contribute to improved state-society relations and greater accountability and responsiveness from local authorities to their constituents. Research into the state-society relationship in Cambodia discerns a shift in the way citizens interact with authority from relations of fear to relations characterised by respect, although hierarchy and personal relations continue to be important (Öjendal and Kim 2006). A study of local leadership in three communes has also observed that rural villagers address local leaders using the family titles of aunt, uncle or grandfather to emphasise closeness and familiarity as well as obligation on the part of local leaders to protect and look after their villagers in the way family members would do for one another (Thon et al. 2009). This study also revealed that local actors tend to lean towards their villagers' side, except in conflicts that involve powerful external actors.

Finally, decentralisation reform has offered a new platform for citizens as well as civil society organisations and international donors to engage and work with state authorities in making local government more transparent and accountable while promoting local development projects. Voters now better understand the value of their votes and have

become more active in choosing more benevolent leaders and voting out those leaders who mistreated them if they are given a choice (Öjendal and Kim 2013). Civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations, which play important roles in Cambodia's development, have been able to work with local authorities in mobilising citizens' needs, participating in local planning and decision-making processes, as well as implementing development projects. Recent implementation of social accountability initiatives may further extend the space for engagement by both citizens and their civil society representatives with local authorities on selected public services.

Despite advances, these outcomes are subject to increasingly intense scrutiny and could be jeopardised as the gap between public expectations and local government's capacity to respond rapidly widens. Analysis of Cambodia's demography shows an increasingly diverse constituency, especially among the young population – people under 30. This young population is less marked by the country's violent history, is better educated than the previous generation, has greater access to information, is highly mobile and has a far higher exposure to the outside world. Expectations of local government to respond to the particular needs of this youth population coupled with expectations from higher levels of government have so far put enormous pressure on local government and could undermine their legitimacy and significance.

Progress in equipping local government with capacity – resources, power and autonomy – to respond to local expectations and high level demands has been painstakingly slow. At the commune level, although authorities have political legitimacy, their mandate and resources are fairly limited. The district, which is the focus of decentralisation reform in terms of service delivery, although lacking a democratic power base, has local development potential. However, the provision of resources and power over service delivery functions for the district as envisioned in the 2008 Law on Administrative Management of Capital, Provinces, Municipalities, Districts and Khans (the Organic Law) has not been implemented. Recent study reveals that the district's responsiveness to citizens and commune councils' demands remains constrained by their meagre own-source revenues and reluctance to exercise their permissive authority allowed by the

legal framework (NCDD 2016).

Local government's limited capacity is accentuated by local actors' close proximity to the problems, the immediacy of their interactions with citizens, and the blame they constantly receive from local citizens for problems experienced locally. Local government is also increasingly expected by higher level government to manage and contain local problems to prevent them from becoming worse or more widespread. Civil society organisations and NGOs' engagement with local government through various reform initiatives also adds pressure as they deflect attention from national to local government over government service delivery performance. These expectations and pressure have overwhelmed local government. The implication of this gap for local government in Cambodia has been significant as many decisions regarding the transfer of authority and resources from central ministries to local government have been subject to very long delays, despite central government's commitment to deepen decentralisation reform.

Emerging challenges of local government

Three key challenges emerge as local actors manage to narrow the gap between public expectations and capacity to be more locally accountable and responsive; they are local initiative, resource mobilisation and civic engagement.

Challenge 1: Taking local initiative

A widening gap between expectations and capacity signifies government institutions' inability, reluctance or lack of authority to deal effectively with public demands. At the local level, the scope of the problems faced often extends beyond local government boundaries. The major policy issues local government in Cambodia face such as infrastructure, employment, irrigation, land use and natural resource governance may be within their permissive functions, but have not yet been put under their authority.

For local government to be able to respond to local problems, whether mobilising support and collaboration from different sector ministries or their local constituents, they must exercise local agency and democratic discretions. So far, despite considerable authority granted to local government under the Law on the Administration and Management of Commune/Sangkat (the Commune

Law 2001) and the Organic Law 2008, studies have shown that local actors are both reluctant and constrained in their ability to exercise authority and take initiative (NCDD 2012; Eng 2014). This is partly because the laws provide only a broad outline of a general mandate for local government, and require detailed guidelines, many of which have yet to be developed, from central government as to how local actors implement these provisions. More importantly, it is because there are risks involved, politically or personally or both, for local actors to develop their own initiatives, fearing repercussions from constituents, higher-level government or powerful external actors.

Studies have shown that for local governments to become accountable and responsive providers, decentralisation reform must remould them from administrators of centrally mandated agencies, who merely comply and respond to central government policies and instructions, into assertive local bodies empowered to exercise authority with greater autonomy, and most important of all, to use their own initiative in addressing local concerns. Given the growing gap between public expectations and local government capacity in the context of the gradual approach to decentralisation in Cambodia, taking initiative and promoting a sense of ownership in local decision making are critical to strengthening the democratic authority of the rural villagers they represent. CDRI research finds that local government performance varies from one context to the next but is highly dependent on leadership initiatives. Taking local initiative requires not only leadership but also active encouragement, cooperation and backing from higher levels of government. At the same time, local actors need assured protection from official reprimands for testing new ideas or trying out new approaches in response to public expectations.

Challenge 2: Mobilising resources

Decentralisation reform awards a wide array of roles and responsibilities to local government: functions range from civil administrative services to basic services delivery and conflict resolution. Over the years, a gradual increase in financial resources has enabled local government to carry out their responsibilities and deliver services. Intergovernmental transfer of funds from national to local government for the commune/sangkat fund has steadily grown from 2 percent of domestic

revenue in 2002 to 2.8 percent in 2016. Similarly, transfer from domestic revenue for the district/khan fund has slowly increased from 0.8 percent in 2013 to 0.9 percent in 2016. However, commune and district operational and administrative costs swallow up significant amounts of these funds, while resources available for the commune and the district to respond to local needs and provide the delivery services assigned to them by law remain very limited. Other sources of local government funding allowed for by Commune Law 2001 and Organic Law 2008 such as tax and non-tax revenues including provisions for own-source revenues have yet to be activated.

At the moment, local resource mobilisation efforts aimed at responding to locally identified problems come from ad hoc opportunities linked to donor and NGO project activities and personal contacts with potential beneficiaries at local and national level. This practice has been quite problematic for local actors to exercise their agency and, equally important, for citizens to put pressure on local government for greater accountability. In essence, local government in Cambodia needs both a larger budget envelope and diverse revenue streams that would enable them to be seen not just as agency of national government but also as genuine local government: one that is accountable and responsive to local people.

Challenge 3: Engaging with citizens

The third challenge concerns the issue of public participation and accountability, and the imperative of engaging citizens with different interests, gender, ages and socioeconomic status in local governance. Public engagement is not only crucial in democratic governance so that the decisions and actions of local government are representative and responsive to their constituents. Working with citizens allows local officials to deliver services based on locally identified demands. Active public participation is also necessary for building a stronger accountability relationship between local officials and their electorates.

The evolving local governance coupled with demographic shifts emphasises that engaging with this new and growing significance of young populations in local governance is indispensable and urgent. Although increasingly visible, youth often remain detached from local formal structures

and decision-making processes even though they comprise 60 percent of the population. CDRI research on youth's political participation in rural commune development planning suggests that commune institutions have not adapted to include and engage youth (Heng et al. 2014). The study also finds that local planning and development implementation processes have not been able to respond to youth's particular needs, for example in education, health and employment (Heng et al. 2014).

The challenge for local government in Cambodia is paramount in that they not only need to ensure they include this new group of citizens and their perspectives in local governance processes, but at the same time are able to adapt and respond to youth's particular needs.

Conclusion

Local government in Cambodia has undergone significant changes since decentralisation reform started in 2002. So has the socioeconomic and political context within which local government exists and functions, most notably the emergence of the largest youth generation in contemporary Cambodia who are rapidly becoming demographically dominant and operating with quite a different attitude to that of the old generation. Nonetheless, the strengthening of institutional capacities for reform by local government is lagging behind the public's increasingly diverse expectations. This widening gap between expectations of public services and capacity to deliver them puts local governments under intense pressure and scrutiny from both their constituencies and higher levels of government. As local government tries to narrow the gap, they face three major challenges.

Local actors may have good ideas and solutions to local concerns, but they are often reluctant to act on their ideas and actually exercise local agency as permitted under existing law. Taking initiative and ownership of decisions has also been constrained by the lack of resources and authority over revenue mobilisation. Finally, the impact of demographic changes with increased significance of young citizens challenges local government to find new strategies for public engagement and local services delivery.

The challenges facing local government in Cambodia are likely to intensify in the near future,

unless given immediate attention. The government has reoriented its efforts to deal with this situation in Implementation Plan 3 Phase II by focusing on promoting the implementation of permissive functions, expanding the transfer of sector functions, and implementing the social accountability framework (NCDD 2014). However, bolder and deeper reform efforts to enable local actors and their institutions to be more autonomous, well-resourced and locally accountable are desperately needed so that local government can tackle emerging challenges more effectively.

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