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## TRUST IN COMMUNE/SANGKAT COUNCILS IN CAMBODIA

### Introduction

Cambodia’s commune councils were officially established with the first commune/sangkat election in February 2002. They have broad authority to promote local development and represent the needs of local constituencies in local and national development planning processes. However, the commune faces a number of key challenges as the government’s decentralisation and deconcentration reform is not making the progress expected, as outlined in the 10-year National Program for Sub-National Democratic Development 2010–2019.

The commune, despite performance-related legitimacy questions from local citizens, continues to be highly respected and the most trusted level of government in Cambodia. In a nationally representative survey conducted by CDRI in 2017, citizens gave a high trust rating to commune councils compared to other public institutions. This finding draws is consistent with the findings of previous studies<sup>1</sup> conducted after the first commune election. This suggests that decentralisation at commune level has genuinely contributed to building confidence in the government and closer relations between the state and citizens. The preference for local officials also reflects the way in which villagers build relations with commune authorities, primarily through personal relationships rather than institutions. The article concludes with suggestions on ways to support and further strengthen trust in



Commune councils are popular and respected by most Cambodians, from their role in local development to conflict resolution. Phnom Penh, May 2018

the commune for enhancing civic participation and local government performance.

### Commune/Sangkat councils in Cambodia

The commune/sangkat election in 2002 marked the start of Cambodia’s official decentralisation reform. It was assumed that local government would be closer to the citizens and be informed about their needs and demands and hence be more responsive to local needs. Decentralisation reform brought about important changes at the commune level. Commune councillors for the first time were directly elected by local people, resulting in representatives

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<sup>1</sup> See Ninh and Henke 2005, and FitzGerald and So 2007.

from several major political parties being elected to sit on the councils between the 2002 and 2012 elections.<sup>2</sup> There has also been a fundamental shift in the function of the commune, from the security-focused roles and responsibilities of the 1990s to development-focused responsibilities and activities. Communes are now responsible for managing participatory development planning in order to identify and implement local development projects using the national transfer fund called the Commune/Sangkat Fund (CSF). Communes have also been tasked to provide civil registration services, register voters and mediate local conflicts.

Research studies have found that commune councils face a number of difficulties in performing their functions as they try to represent and respond to the expectations of their constituents (Rusten et al. 2004; NCDDDS 2012; World Bank 2013; Eng 2016). This is mainly due to three factors. First, the commune budget remains dependent on the national transfer fund and is relatively small, although it has been steadily increasing. Over the last 16 years, the share of the national budget allocated to CSF has grown from just 2 percent of domestic revenue in 2002 to 3 percent in 2018. The fund has provided the commune councils discretionary power to implement their respective commune development plans. So far they have focused on small-scale infrastructure projects such as road maintenance and repair of irrigation facilities. There has also been some progress with regard to the implementation of the 2001 Law on Commune/Sangkat Administration and Management, particularly the provisions that allow commune councils to collect their own revenues and taxes. Since 2018, the commune has received a 1 percent share of provincial tax revenues. The commune also collects administrative fees for civil registration and other administrative services. However, these revenues are minimal, and the CSF remains the main source of income. Studies have consistently shown that limited revenue is a key impediment to commune councils fulfilling their roles in promoting local development as well as being seen to be accountable to constituents (Kim 2012; Mansfield and Macleod 2004; Öjendal and

Kim 2011; Rusten et al. 2004; World Bank 2012).

Second, the devolution of line ministry functions to the district level has made negligible progress, and as a consequence, has significant implications for the authority and accountability of the commune in promoting the delivery of basic public services (Eng 2016; NCDDDS 2012; Particip Consortium 2016). This is because the commune elects the district council and is expected to represent local needs at the district level, as outlined in the 2008 Law on Administrative Management of Capital, Provinces, Municipalities, Districts and Khans. Despite repeated calls by the National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development to line ministries to transfer functions to the district level, efforts have been hampered by the complexity of the task and the difficulty of coordinating different line ministries. Implementation Plan 3 for the National Program of Sub-National Democratic Development 2018–20 renews the government's commitment to devolve more responsibilities to the district. Current developments on this subject hint that rather than functional devolution, all line ministries' district offices will be integrated into the district administration. This initiative is expected to be rolled out in 2020.

Third, the commune is constrained by weak capacity to perform its functions and engage with citizens (COMFREL 2007; NCDDDS 2012; Particip Consortium 2016). Since 2002, elections have replaced some unpopular local officials with more popular faces on the councils. Nonetheless, commune council seats are mostly occupied by elderly men with decade-long service within the local leadership group. They often lack formal education and training as these generations grew up during the Khmer Rouge years. Women's representation in the councils remains small, albeit gradually increasing from 8.5 percent in 2002 to 15 percent in 2007 and 17.8 percent in 2012. Due to state budget constraints, each commune has a staff of just one commune clerk to assist and work for the council. Commune clerks are currently recruited and supervised by the Ministry of Interior. Although commune clerks are often younger and better trained than commune councillors, they are fully occupied with administrative tasks and paperwork, and have little time and experience to assist the commune with local development initiatives. Some aspects of the capacity gap have been bridged by district and

<sup>2</sup> Representatives from different political parties stood in the 2017 election. However, the disbanding of the main opposition party led to the replacement of elected councillors from that party in late 2017. All commune councillors now belong to the Cambodian People's Party.

Table 1: Who do you think can you trust more (percent)? (N=1,600)

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Media	12	15	20	29	24
Commune	31	30	23	13	4
Police/courts	12	22	25	24	13
Hospitals/schools	36	26	23	13	5
Politicians	6	7	10	21	54
No confidence in any of these	3	0	0	0	0

Source: CDRI's Report on Cambodia's young and old generation, Eng et al. Forthcoming

provincial-level staff, particularly around planning, project management and policy implementation. Even so, commune capacity for promoting social services delivery and local development still falls short of what is needed.

Essentially, although the commune councils are expected to represent and respond to local demands, they have difficulty doing so. They therefore depend almost entirely on support and coordination from higher levels of government to deliver services and implement development projects in their localities. Despite this state of affairs, the commune is perceived favourably by Cambodian citizens as the most trusted level of government. Understanding how this has occurred entails examining the way in which local villagers conduct relations with commune authorities.

### Commune-villager relations

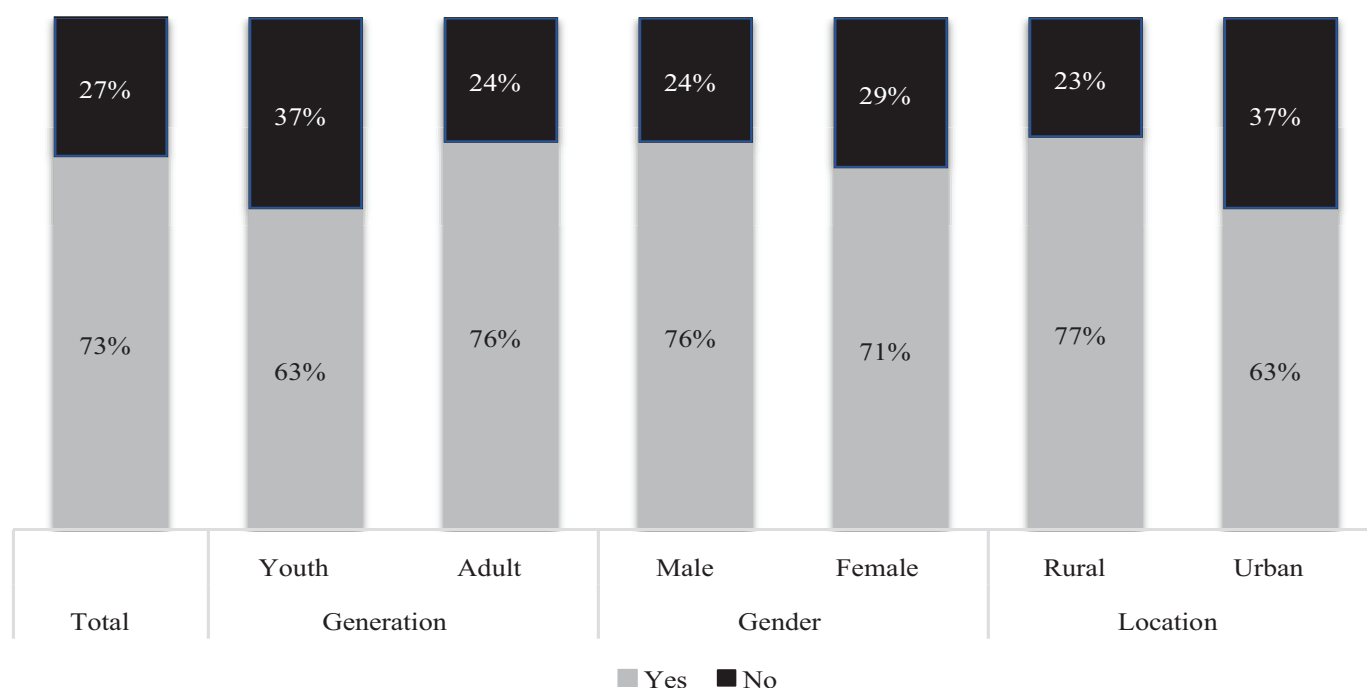
Cambodians have consistently placed more trust in commune/sangkat authorities than in higher levels of government. CDRI's survey of Cambodia's young and old generations' attitudes towards different public institutions conducted in late 2017 revealed that despite generally low trust in institutions, Cambodians trust the commune more than the media, police, courts and politicians (Eng et al. Forthcoming). Service providers at schools and hospitals also received a similar level of trust as the commune/sangkat chiefs. Among a choice of five institutions (listed in Table 1), 36 percent of survey respondents said they trusted schools and hospitals the most, 31 percent chose the commune, 12 percent the media, 12 percent the police and courts, and 6 percent politicians. Our survey also found that most Cambodians (86 percent) respect their commune chiefs. Both young and old, women and men, rural and urban residents think alike when it comes to respect for authority, and they look up to and hold their commune chiefs in high regard (Eng et al. Forthcoming).

This high level of confidence in the commune was also reported in previous studies. A survey conducted by the Asia Foundation immediately after the first commune election found that almost all respondents (99 percent) trusted commune authorities more than provincial officials and parliamentarians (Ninh and Henke 2005, 19). Such a positive attitude was also captured in a poverty study conducted by CDRI in 2007. The study found that respondents in the nine villages surveyed trusted local officials more than higher levels of government: 52 percent and 48 percent for village chiefs and commune councils, respectively (FitzGerald and So 2007, 137–138).

This evidence is significant and existing literature suggests some possible reasons for this high level of trust in the commune. It can be argued that villagers trust the commune as it has been more open than any other level of government, and is perceived to have generally served local people. Most Cambodians (73 percent) have experienced participating in local activities and meetings (Figure 1). Specifically, about one in three Cambodians (37 percent) said they participated in commune council meetings, a further 21 percent had joined in the monitoring of commune projects, and 17 percent took part in public forums (Table 2). It is important to note the gaps between young and old Cambodians, men and women, and rural and urban residents in their experience of local participation. Young Cambodians are less likely than older Cambodians to be involved in commune activities: just 19 percent of youth had participated in commune council meetings compared to 43 percent of adults (Table 2). Women and urban residents are also much less involved in local meetings than men and rural residents.

Previous qualitative research suggested that villagers knew the work of their commune councils and were generally pleased with them (COMFREL 2007; Kim 2012; Mansfield and MacLeod 2004). The communes were found to

Figure 1: Have you participated in these local activities/meetings? (N=1,600)



Source: CDRI's Report on Cambodia's young and old generation, Eng et al. Forthcoming

Table 2: Have you participated in the following events (percent)? (N=1,600)

	Total	Generation		Gender		Location	
		Youth	Adult	Male	Female	Rural	Urban
Village meetings	58	37	65	60	57	63	46
Commune meetings	37	19	43	44	33	37	38
Monitoring of commune projects	21	13	23	27	16	22	18
School meetings	31	37	30	32	31	34	25
Health centre meetings	43	37	45	38	46	48	28
Public forums	17	10	20	23	13	18	15

Source: CDRI's Report on Cambodia's young and old generation, Eng et al. 2019

have followed procedures, acted in the interests of their constituents, and contributed to improved local development (Öjendal and Kim 2011; World Bank 2013). There was also a perception among citizens that accessing services provided by the commune councils was relatively easy and cheap compared to accessing services provided by other government institutions. Equally important, other qualitative studies revealed that villagers relied heavily on the commune chiefs as their primary point of contact with higher levels of government, and could approach them for information and help with difficulties accessing public services and managing conflict situations (Kim 2012; Mansfield and MacLeod 2004). CDRI's study on poverty in nine villages also revealed that most villagers, when in need of help, only contacted local officials

and rarely went beyond the commune level (FitzGerald and So 2007, 123–126).

Arguably, the commune is the level of government with which most Cambodians can confidently interact. This is reflected through the use of kinship terms and investment in personal relationships with local authorities rather than formal institutions. CDRI's study of local leadership in three communes found that villagers address local leaders using the family titles of *ming* (aunt), *pou* (uncle) and *ta* (grandfather) to emphasise closeness and familiarity as well as obligation on the part of the local leaders in protecting and looking after their villagers in the way family members would do for one another (Thon et al. 2009).

More interestingly, the study found that villagers use the terms *mae* (mother), *euv* (father) and *mae-*

Table 3: Where do you get political information from (percent)? (N=1,600)

	Total	Generation		Gender		Location	
		Youth	Adult	Male	Female	Rural	Urban
Television	71	73	71	77	67	70	79
Family	59	61	58	54	62	59	60
Neighbours	51	48	51	51	50	53	46
Local authorities	42	35	44	45	39	44	36
Friends	41	45	39	52	33	38	49
Radio	35	40	34	44	30	38	30
Internet	33	58	25	44	25	25	55
Colleagues	29	33	27	37	23	28	33
Print newspapers	8	11	7	13	5	5	16
CBOs/NGOs	8	12	6	10	6	8	9
I don't get political information	6	5	6	2	8	6	2

Source: CDRI's Report on Cambodia's young and old generation, Eng et al. Forthcoming

*euv* (parents) only for individuals who they consider have lived up to their expectations of ideal paternal care for their villagers (Thon et al. 2009, 37). This village chief was described by villagers as “quiet and nice” and “transparent and not greedy” (Thon et al. 2009, 39). By contrast, villagers refer to local leaders as well as higher level government officials as *achnhathor* (authority) to note the distance, unfamiliarity and distrust.

The preference for personal relationships over institutionalised arrangements means that decentralisation reform has not effectively replaced the informal and indirect with the direct and formal accountability relationship between citizens and the state. Nonetheless, the use of personal strategies for awarding or withholding legitimacy is significant, appears to be clearly perceived by local leaders and is something that commune chiefs pay particular attention to, since gaining the loyalty of their constituents forms an important aspect of their electoral mobilisation strategy. For example, CDRI's survey in 2017 found that commune chiefs were important and ranked equally as friends and as sources of political information by 44 percent of adult respondents and 35 percent of youth respondents (see Table 3). Importantly, the decision to vote also depended on the commune. The Asia Foundation survey in 2014 showed that most Cambodians (74 percent) preferred to cast their votes in the village they originated from rather where they actually lived and worked, even though doing so involved extensive cost of time and money (Everett and Meisburger 2014, 57).

### Conclusion

There is clear evidence suggesting that commune councils are popular and respected by most Cambodians, from their role in local development to conflict resolution, and to mobilising voter turnout in national and local elections. Such a strong relationship was achieved through becoming more accessible and responsive to local demands but also equally through the embedding of personal relationships into local state-society relations. The impact of this twin strategy has been effective in building trust, but may be waning due to demographic shifts in which young Cambodians are more likely to be mobile, employed in urban areas or abroad, and increasingly depend on social media for political information (BBC Media Action 2014; Eng et al. Forthcoming).

To the extent that personal relations have become a normal way of interacting in Cambodia, the formalisation and institutionalisation of state-society relations, particularly between the commune and villagers, will require not just the establishment of new processes under decentralisation reform, but a more fundamental change in behaviour and attitudes, not just on the part of citizens but also on the part of public officials.

Concrete steps towards enhancing citizens' trust and confidence in government should go hand in hand with the government's commitment to improving service delivery and public sector performance. This can be done through promoting the responsiveness of public officials, improving the transparency of public services delivery, and further facilitating the active engagement of citizens and civil society in public decision-making processes.

Specific recommendations to strengthen commune/sangkat-villager trust include the following actions:

- Increase CSF allocations and commune/sangkat discretion, and at the same time enable the commune to mobilise local revenue sources for more effective responsiveness.
- Enhance accountability relations between commune and district levels in terms of government-wide responsiveness for social services and local economic development including the needs of young people.
- Promote broad-based participation of ordinary villagers and youth in key decision making by engaging strategically with civil society organisations and local businesses.

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