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The Enduring Gap: Decentralisation Reform and Youth Participation in Local Rural Governance



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HENG Seiha, VONG Mun and CHHEAT Sreang
With the assistance of CHHUON Nareth

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ACRONYMS

CAS	Center for Advanced Study
CBO	Community-based organisation
CCHR	Cambodia Center for Human Rights
CIRCLE	Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement
COMFREL	Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
D&D	Decentralisation and Deconcentration
EIC	Economic Institute of Cambodia
HRP	Human Rights Party
MoEYS	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports
LDP	League for Democracy Party
NRP	Norodom Ranariddh Party
RGC	Royal Government of Cambodia
SRP	Sam Rainsy Party
UNDP	United Nations Development Program

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ABSTRACT

To understand the contribution of the decentralisation reform to youth participation in local rural governance, this paper reviews empirically how youth have utilised the participatory opportunities enabled by the decentralisation reform based on three themes: civic, political and electoral. The findings suggest that despite decentralisation having been implemented for more than a decade, youth participation in local rural governance in general and development planning in particular has been limited. When youth do engage, the activities are often triggered or facilitated by intermediaries (i.e. youth associations, commune councils and village chiefs). Given this reliance, it can be argued that youth still lack courage and remain passive without the role of intermediaries.

1

INTRODUCTION

Decentralisation has long been known as a means for creating a space and eventually promoting citizen participation in local political decision making (Smith 1985; Rondinelli et al. 1983; Crook & Manor 1998; Manor 1999; Kulipossa 2004; Faguet 2004; Cheema 2005; Litvack & Seddon 1999). In particular, decentralisation has a potential to increase the number of youth in decision making and political activities such as public meetings, contacting and election campaigns (Crook & Manor 1998; Blair 2000; Kauzya 2007). Schillemans and Bouverne-De Bie (2005, in Robertson 2009: 48) claim that decentralisation is “a method of enhancing opportunities for young people to participate in political processes by connecting them more directly to political agents”.

In Cambodia, decentralisation and deconcentration (D&D) began in 2002 with two main goals: (1) the promotion of local democracy and (2) the improvement of local service delivery, ultimately aiming at alleviating poverty (RGC 2005). The reform has reached all levels, with directly elected commune/*sangkat* councils, the lowest political unit, since 2002, and indirectly elected district and provincial councils since 2009. Through this reform, a degree of autonomy in functions, decision making and resources has been delegated to local government (i.e. the commune councils) so that they can represent the interests of local people and become more accountable and responsive to their needs (Kim 2012).

The literature shows that the results of decentralisation in Cambodia are mixed (e.g. Öjendal & Kim 2006; Kim & Öjendal 2009; Kim 2012; Heng et al. 2011; Heng & So 2012; Malena & Chhim 2009; EIC 2010). Democratic decentralisation reform in Cambodia contributes to improved local development, in particular basic service delivery and local infrastructure, as well as the development of political pluralism, thus laying the groundwork for local democracy. Citizens are now allowed to choose local leaders and participate and show their preferences for local development and community needs through participatory local governance. However, the level of actual citizen participation in local development is low, hampered by the inability of councils to meet local needs, preoccupation with daily living, historical reluctance, invitation formality and so on. Also, participation is passive and often driven by the need for immediate benefits.

Although a number of research studies looked at the contribution of decentralisation to general citizen participation in local politics and development, so far there has been no systematic review of the specific contributions of decentralisation to youth participation. This study will fill this gap.

The research question is: How have youth used the space opened by the decentralisation reform? The answer to this question will give critical insights to enable a discussion of whether decentralisation is emerging as a means for promoting youth participation in local rural governance. In answering this question, civic, electoral and political indicators will be employed. Each indicator will be critically discussed in a later section.

Youth (see Table 1 for demographic data) is defined as “a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood’s independence and awareness of our interdependence as members of a community” (UNESCO 2013). Simply put, youth is “both young and energetic, yet also

having passed the years of childhood ...” (Rustam 2004: 13). Making the definition more realistic and practical, the UN General Assembly defined youth as a fixed age group between 15 and 24 years (UN 2014). Despite this definition, there has so far been no commonly accepted definition of youth because the age range varies among different countries and societies. For instance, Cambodia’s Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport defines youth as those between the ages of 15 and 30, either single or married. This study, however, adopts the definition as those between the ages of 18 and 30. This range is based on the Law on Election of Members of the National Assembly and the Law on Election of the Commune Councils, which state that to be eligible to vote, every citizen must be 18 or over.

Table 1: Youth (18-30) Demographics in Cambodia

Indicators	2004			2008		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
Population						
Total	1506558	1578213	3084771	1676303	1733431	3409734
% of total population	11%	12%	23%	13%	13%	26%
Education (highest year completed)						
Primary (1-6)	611832	741549	1353381	608950	730638	1339588
Lower secondary (7-9)	394989	309488	704477	446081	385679	831760
Upper secondary (10-12)	178645	95631	274275	261446	165427	426873
Tertiary and post-graduate	22359	9593	31952	57019	34366	91385
Technical and vocational training	22179	12621	34800	20494	14116	34610
Indicators	2009			2011		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
Population						
Total	1801780	1869861	3671641	1822238	1865338	3687576
% of total population	13%	13%	26%	13%	13%	26%
Education (highest year completed)						
Primary (1-6)	656118	807487	1463605	608140	739439	1347579
Lower secondary (7-9)	481510	445562	927072	526543	529490	1056033
Upper secondary (10-12)	294906	180865	475771	287764	170685	458449
Tertiary and post-graduate	84327	57646	141973	65690	46706	112396
Technical and vocational training	23077	14058	37135	11638	8528	20166

Note: education here measures the highest level students in each cohort have completed, not the current grade they are in.

Source: Authors' calculations using data from NIS (2004, 2008, 2009, 2011)

2

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

There are three main reasons for conducting this study. First, as argued by the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) in the *Situation Analysis of Youth in Cambodia* (UNCT 2009: 89), decentralisation plays an important role in opening up an opportunity for the participation of youth. With general high hopes or expectations on the role of decentralisation in promoting youth participation, exploring its contribution to young people's participation in local rural governance is significant because the reform has been implemented over the last decade.

Second, there is a lack of current research on decentralisation, and youth and youth participation in local rural governance. Various research studies have been conducted since 2002 to assess the contribution of decentralisation to citizen participation in general (COMFREL 2007; Malena & Chhim 2009; EIC 2010; Heng et al. 2011) and on women's participation and representation in local governance in particular (Kim & Öjendal 2012; Lilja 2009; Thon et al. 2009). The few studies on youth participation in political and economic development in Cambodia (Brown 2008; Mansfield 2008; UNCT 2009; UNDP 2010) do not provide a systematic review of the contributions of decentralisation to youth engagement thus far. This study will attempt to fill this gap.

Last but not least, there is a growing recognition of youth as a socio-economic and political power in Cambodia. The country has the youngest population in South-East Asia, with about 70 percent of its more than 14 million people under the age of 30. The *2008 General Population Census of Cambodia* reported that about 26 percent are aged between 18 and 30 (NIS 2008). This demographic is a great potential driver of social and economic progress and makes youth a powerful constituency or political force. They can help increase economic output, thus helping lift many Cambodians out of poverty and more importantly bringing a new dynamic and vital force into the nation's politics and political transformation (Chak 2012; Welsh & Chang 2012; Mansfield 2008; cf. Yong 2005). Given this great potential, young people are largely regarded as "Cambodia's greatest resource for the future" (UNCT 2009; cf. UNDP 2010). This claim of the significant role of youth as future agents of change or of youth as resources (Kurth-Schai 1988; cf. Checkoway et al. 1995; Finn & Checkoway 1998) is not new. Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan shared a similar view of it (UN 2001). He claimed:

Young people should be at the forefront of global change and innovation. Empowered, they can be key agents for development and peace. If, however, they are left on society's margins, all of us will be impoverished. Let us ensure that all young people have every opportunity to participate fully in the lives of their societies.

Despite the great potential of youth in society, a number of studies find that young people around the world, not limited to Cambodia, encounter several challenges: difficulties with health, education, employment and other social issues that prevent them from realising their potentials and exercising their roles and responsibilities as an important force of change and

development. Consequently, youth have been overlooked and instead painted as “problems of society”, being “alienated from community” and “disengaged from democracy” (Checkoway et al. 2003: 299). What about Cambodian youth? Can they overcome this so-called “negative stereotype or image”¹ and become agents of change and development? These questions and concerns inspire this study, which attempts to analyse the situation of youth in Cambodia, in particular their political participation under decentralisation.

¹ It is said that “[g]enerally ‘youth’ today is seen as a problem: young people are beset by predominantly negative images, are seen as a source of trouble or in trouble.” Moreover, a key component of this negative stereotype is “the belief that young people are alienated from political life, and apathetic and uninterested in social and political issues” (Roker et al. 1999: 186).

3

LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Why Does Youth Participation Matter?

Youth participation is “a process of involving youth in the institutions and the decisions that affect their lives” (Checkoway et al. 1995: 134). Genuine youth participation requires “the active engagement and real influence of young people, not their passive presence or token roles in adult agencies” (Checkoway 2011: 341). Youth participation has a two-way benefit. Firstly, it helps develop the entire community or society. As Handcock (1994, in Finn and Checkoway 1998: 336) stated, active youth participation plays an important role in “re-energizing and sustaining the civic spirit of communities” and “addressing the social issues that are destined to impact their lives and those of future generations”. Bessant (2004: 387; cf. Golombek 2002) shared a similar view by arguing that promoting youth participation would empower them to “help build community and remedy a range of social problems”. More importantly, Henn et al. (2005 in Mycock & Tonge 2012: 143; cf. Bessant 2004; Camino & Zeldin 2002) also claimed that youth participation is the backbone of democratic nation building. Chang (2012: 10) argued:

The decline in the political involvement of younger generations and the decreasing levels of youth participation not only endanger the democratic representativeness of today, but also jeopardise the democracy of tomorrow.

Secondly, youth participation helps promote the civic and political life of young people. Apart from their contribution to helping develop community, addressing various social issues and promoting democracy, youth themselves can also benefit from their own participation. Checkoway et al. (1995: 135-136; cf. Finn & Checkoway 1998) categorised the benefits as follows:

1. *Youth participation involves individuals in ways which produce positive psychosocial results.* Studies show that participation can contribute to open-mindedness ... personal responsibility ... social and civic competence ... moral and ego development ... and a sense of efficacy and self-esteem ...
2. *Youth participation can contribute to organisational development ...* [Y]outh participation can engage them in formal organisational efforts to set priorities, formulate plans, and implement programmes, and in informal structures and personal relationships that provide social support and, in some cases surrogate family functions.
3. *Youth participation can contribute to community development.* As young people become builders or entrepreneurs, they contribute to community development.
4. *Youth participation can contribute to political development ...* [Y]outh participation can involve young people in the policy process. There are young people who effectively participate in public proceedings, conduct voter registration campaigns, serve on organisation boards and committees, and act like leaders in a community. They persuade public officials to allocate resource for programmes, and they pressure agency staff to comply with administrative regulations

In their study *Young People's Voluntary and Campaigning Activities as Sources of Political Education*, Roker et al. (1999; cf. Brown 2008; UNCT 2009) also found that when young people participate in society, especially in volunteering and campaigning activities, their political knowledge, awareness and understanding will be increased. Undeniably, these activities help promote youth citizenship through enabling them to realise their roles and responsibilities as a citizen (Mycock & Tonge 2012; cf. Zaff et al. 2003).

3.2. Theoretical Perspectives on Political Participation

Political participation is a necessary condition for democracy (Verba & Nie 1972; Kaase & Marsh 1979; Parry et al. 1992; van Deth 2001; Alesina & Giuliano 2009) because the nature and amount of citizen political involvement can determine the quality and performance of democracy (Robertson 2009: 16). Abels (2007: 103) further explained that “more citizen participation is often equated with more democracy, better accountability and more effective policy decisions”. It is therefore concluded that political participation has positive impacts on the quality of democracy.

Political participation is defined as “those actions by private citizens by which they seek to influence or to support government and politics” (Milbrath & Goel 1977: 2). Kaase and Marsh (1979: 42) argued that it is “all voluntary activities by individual citizens intended to influence either directly or indirectly political choices at various levels of the political system”. Norris (2002: 16) expanded this concept by claiming that it is “any dimension of activity that is either designed directly to influence government agencies and the policy process, or indirectly to impact civil society, or which attempt to alter systematic patterns of social behaviour”.

From his survey of the literature, van Deth (2001: 6) put forward four common characteristics of political participation:

First, political participation refers to people in their role as citizens and not, say, as politicians or civil servants. Second, political participation is understood as an *activity* (‘action’) – simply watching television or claiming to be curious about politics does not constitute participation. Third, the activities of citizens we define as political participation should be *voluntary* and not ordered by the ruling class or obliged under some law or rule. Finally, political participation concerns *government* and *politics* in a broad sense of these words (‘political system’) and is neither restricted to specific phases (such as parliamentary decision making, or the ‘input’ side of the political system), nor to specific levels or areas (such as national elections or contacts with officials).

With dramatic extension of the role of the state in everyday life, van Deth argued that for many people “the distinction between political and non-political activities ... completely disappeared” (2001: 9) As political processes are becoming harder to separate from other processes, every activity of citizens aiming at influencing public decision making can be considered political participation, excluding those taking place in homes, schools or the workplace (2001: 12).

The study of political participation modes has evolved over time. In the 1940s to the 1960s, activities such as voting, lobbying, party affiliation, joining political organisations /parties/ meetings, other activities related to electoral processes and contacting public officials or representatives were commonly employed to measure it (cf. Conge 1988; van Deth 2001; Ekman & Amna 2009; Lamprianou 2013). Such activities, which were part of citizens' rights and duties, became known as conventional modes of political participation. As Conway (1991; cf. Munroe 2002) put it, conventional participation referred to those modes that took place within and conformed to the norms and traditions of a specific society. In short, they were "far more structured and normally lawful" (Lamprianou 2013: 25).

The concept of political participation was expanded in the late 1960s and the 1970s to include civil disobedience, political protest or political violence (Barnes et al. 1979). There were petitions, demonstrations, boycotts, rent or tax strikes, unofficial industrial strikes, occupation of buildings, blocking of traffic, damage to property and personal violence. These forms of political participation were known as unconventional modes (Munroe 2002). According to Barnes et al. (1979: 41), unconventional participation referred to those modes that were "non-institutionalised and fell short of laws, customary norms and traditions of a particular country and that at least aimed at changing the socio-political structure of that country". In a similar vein, Munroe (2002: 5) stated that they are "... more aggressive, more assertive, and may even break the law". Given the radical or extreme forms, Lamprianou (2013: 26; cf. Bourne 2010) argued that they were therefore "less acceptable, both socially and legally".

The most recent expansion of this concept occurred in the 1990s after the diminishing division between the political and non-political sphere of modern society, and the revival of Tocquevillean and communitarian approaches (van Deth 2001: 6). The modes of political participation include civil activities such as volunteering and social engagement (Putnam 2000; Norris 2002). Such activities have been labelled alternative forms of participation or sometimes unofficial and informal ones (Harris 2001; Gill 2007) because they take "an aloof stance regarding official institutions" (Riley et al. 2010: 345; cf. Lamprianou 2013: 26). These seem to contrast with Conge's (1988) narrower, state-centred definitions.² Despite disagreement over the definitions of political participation, this study tends to follow van Deth's (2001).

3.3. Views on Youth Participation in Cambodia

There is an emerging body of literature on youth apathy and disengagement from politics (Quintelier 2007; Wilkison 1996; Hackett 1997; O'Toole et al. 2003; Manning 2010). These authors found decreasing levels of youth political participation, such as declining voter turnout, dropping membership of political parties, less concern with politics and low levels of participation in social or political activities (see details in Quintelier 2007: 165). Concern over youth political participation happens not only in Western (established democratic) countries, but also in (East) Asian countries (Chang 2012: 1-2; cf. Huang 2012). In this respect, building a strong and healthy democratic society is very challenging. As Verba and Nie (1972: 1) put

² Conge (1988: 247) claimed that activities (e.g. belonging to local associations or volunteering in community projects) that do not involve the state regarding the allocation of public goods are not political participation. They are instead considered "social participation". Political participation has to involve "behaviour within the realm of government." He defined it as "individual or collective action at the national or local level that supports or opposes state structures, authorities, and/or decisions regarding allocation of public goods ... [whereby] the action can be verbal or written ... violent or nonviolent and of any intensity".

it: “where few take part in decisions there is little democracy; the more participation there is in decisions, the more democracy there is”.

As in many countries, existing literature on Cambodia suggests low levels of youth participation in politics (COMFREL 2007; UNCT 2009; UNDP 2010; Chang 2012; Yong 2005; Huang 2012; CCHR 2013). These studies offered different reasons for the low participation or lesser interest of young people in politics.

The first suggestion is that low youth participation largely results from the strong influence of cultural pattern and hierarchal structures. As Chandler (1996; 2000) and Martin (1994) claimed, the Cambodian social structure is deeply hierarchical, and age hierarchy is very strong and important. Respect for elders and hierarchy remains “sacrosanct” (Martin 1994: 11; cf. Kim 2012). Martin further explained:

In the Khmer milieu, the *bâng*, or “elder,” is automatically right. “Elder” means not only older persons but also those who have knowledge, power, wealth, or influence...

Current research (Yong 2005; UNCT 2009; UNDP 2010; Tan 2008; CCHR 2013) also confirms the continued dominance of such a standpoint. Social deference to the elders or age hierarchy remains active in society; young people are expected to listen to their elders, and the elders should be in decision making positions. This creates an environment not conducive to young people taking an active role in decision making or politics at large.

The lack of support and encouragement from the family also explains the limited possibilities or opportunities for young people’s participation (UNCT 2009; cf. CCHR 2013). This is seen in the fact that Cambodian parents are still critical of their children’s participation in civic activities and often perceive such participation or engagement “as political in nature,” which historically has been associated with “risks” (KYA 2008, in UNCT 2009: 91; UNDP 2010). Undeniably, the social environment and conservative beliefs discourage young people from active participation in or beyond their communities. As Smetana and Metzger (2005 in Celestine 2005: 22-23) put it, the family³ could potentially influence civic and political patterns and choices of youth. In a similar vein, Alesina and Giuliano (2009: 3) claimed that “the more the family is all that matters for an individual the less he/she will care about the rest of society and the polity”.

The second suggestion is linked to economic factors. Poor living conditions also impede engagement in society (Mansfield 2008; UNCT 2009). Mansfield (2008: 29) stated: “While all young people in Cambodia should be introduced to concepts surrounding civic engagement, their ability to participate will be limited by the demands made upon them by their family”. It is apparent that despite the decline in the overall poverty rate in the country, many rural Cambodians remain poor.⁴ This obliges the family to devote more time to making a living,

³ Research studies (Hyman 1959; Niemi & Sobieszek 1977; Dolan 1995; Smetana & Metzger 2005) argued that the family is the most influential agent on young people’s developing political behaviour and attitudes. Family influence on young people’s political socialisation is twofold: (1) the ability of families to pass on particular political attitudes, values and identities; and (2) the extent to which families shape children’s attitudes toward authority figures, public leaders and the government (Dolan 1995:252).

⁴ The poverty headcount index for Cambodia as a whole fell from 34.8% in 2004 (in villages included in the 2007 CSES sampling frame) to 30.1% in 2007 (World Bank 2009: vii). However, Ministry of Planning (2006, in Tong & Srey 2011: 1) found “poverty reduction has not been uniform across the country. Poverty rates are higher in rural areas than in urban areas in all geographical zones”.

rather than prioritising public activities and/or allowing their children to become civically engaged. Due to poverty, many rural young people are forced to drop out of school to contribute financially to the family or to help with household chores (UNCT 2009). At the same time, youth unemployment or migrating to seek employment is another factor that prevents young people from active involvement in society or community. Therefore, too much focus on employment or income generation impacts on their civic responsibility (*ibid.*).

Another claim centres on political factors (e.g., institutional suppression, violent crackdown on peaceful movements or assembly) that help to perpetuate low levels of young people's participation. Despite improved democratisation in the country since 1993, the current political system remains restricted, particularly in freedom of assembly and expression. Many reports have been well documented about the violent crackdown and oppression of peaceful protests and demonstrations, and restrictions on political expression (Henke 2011; Department of State 2012; COMFREL 2013; cf. LICADHO 2013). For instance, COMFREL (2013: 4) reported:

... the political pattern to limit political participation, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly ... was observed in 2011 and continued in 2012. This includes a lack of an open and constructive political discourse on issues of public concern ... and continuing limitations on political participation for the Cambodian public.

Political discussions and meetings in schools are also prohibited (Yong 2005). The restrictions and oppression, COMFREL further explained, "... led many Cambodian citizens to refrain from showing political interest or being politically active" (2013: 4). Most importantly, PACT (2008: 29) argued that the tense Cambodian political landscape does not create a favourable environment for youth participation or activism because the stakes are so high. This reinforces the existing cultural, socio-economic patterns that pose a great challenge to youth participating in social and political affairs.

Cultural patterns of pessimism concerning young people and the various factors that help to reinforce youth apathy and disengagement from social and political issues appear valid to a certain extent. However, too much emphasis on this may have downplayed the changes that have taken place in the country as a result of reforms, transformation and modernisation.

4

ASSESSING YOUTH PARTICIPATION

In this study, Cambodian youth participation in local rural governance will be assessed under the framework of three broad indicators proposed by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), namely civic, political and electoral. Each indicator comprises a number of activities. The civic indicator consists of volunteering for non-electoral organisations, active membership of groups or organisations, fund-raising for charities and community problem solving. The political indicator includes contacting officials, email and written petitions, contacting print and broadcast media, protesting, boycotting and canvassing. The electoral indicator includes regular voting, persuading others, contributing to political parties and assisting candidates with campaigns.

Due to time constraints, this study will choose two activities from each indicator to measure or to give a snapshot of Cambodian youth participation in local rural governance: volunteering for non-electoral organisations and active membership of groups or organisations for the civic indicator; contacting officials and written petitions for the political indicator; and regular voting and campaign activity for the electoral indicator.

Verba et al. (1978: 54) and Milbrath and Goel (1977: 20) called volunteering for non-electoral organisations and active membership of groups⁵ communal activity. The distinctive characteristic of these activities—either individual or cooperative/non-partisan activities—is being “outside of the regular electoral process”; however, it can communicate a great deal of information about social issues to leaders. In other words, it is well understood as a form of participation that focuses on or tries to address social issues in local community.

Contacting officials (Verba et al. 1995 and Parry et al. 1992 both called it contacting or contact) is a process of coming into contact with a public official at any level of government to seek assistance or to express an opinion on a particular issue (CIRCLE 2002). Verba et al. (1978: 54) claimed that “such activity combines high information but usually little pressure ... But it does require a great deal of initiative”. A good point of contacting is that an individual participant can choose his or her own agenda or what to contact about, thus entailing “little conflict among social groups and little cooperation with others” (ibid. 54; Verba et al. 1995: 52). Lastly, signing a written petition—a way in which citizens can express a political or social issue to leaders—is becoming increasingly “acceptable and definitely much more widespread across the political spectrum” (Lamprianou 2013: 27). Internationally, the signing of petitions is becoming more popular among younger generations (Quintelier 2007: 174). The purpose of choosing this activity is to find out if the international trend is reflected in Cambodia.

Voting is but one way in which citizens exercise their rights and make their voices heard in democratic societies (Verba et al. 1978: 47; van Deth 2001). The importance of voting in elections is that it has a “unique characteristic as a blunt but powerful instrument of control over the government” due to the combination of “low information about citizen preferences” and “high pressure on leader with broad outcomes” (Verba et al. 1978: 53). They (*ibid.* 47) further explained:

⁵ *Regular volunteering for a non-electoral organization*: Working in some way to help others for no pay (includes volunteering for an environmental organization; a civic/community organization, a social services organization to help the poor, elderly, or homeless; a hospital; or an organization involved with youth, children, or education). *Active membership in a group or association*: Belonging to and actively participating in (not just donating money) groups or associations, either locally or nationally (CIRCLE 2002).

Political participation does not take place only at election time, nor is participation at election time necessarily the most effective means of citizen influence. Though elections are a major means of citizen control over government officials, they are rather blunt instruments of control. For the individual or for particular groups of citizens, the most important political activities may be those in the between-elections period, when citizens try to influence government decisions in relation to specific problems that concern them.

Campaign activity or citizen activity in electoral processes is another significant mode of activity in democratisation since, like voting, "... it exerts a lot of pressure on leaders, and for the same reason. But it can communicate more information about the participants' preferences because campaign activists are a more clearly identifiable group with whom candidates may be in close contact" (Verba et al. 1978: 53). Without doubt, campaign activity gives a platform to citizens to exert more influence on the election result due to their collective efforts (ibid.).

The motive for selecting these activities from the three broad indicators is that they are important elements in the democratisation process in Cambodia. The conventional forms (regular voting, campaign activity and contacting) are still regarded as important indicators for Cambodia, especially in the decentralisation reform, although the trend of youth participation in modern Western societies has moved toward alternative forms of participation. For instance, studies found that young people in established Western democratic societies shied away from traditional politics and turned down conventional forms of participation: voting, party affiliation and activities related to electoral processes (Inglehard 1977). They instead engaged in social and civic activities, such as volunteering or joining local or national civic organisations (Tarrow 1998; Wenzel et al. 2001).

Regular voting and electoral activities such as campaign and volunteering for candidates or political organisations are imperative to sustain democracy. Moreover, a number of reforms, especially decentralisation, have been implemented in an effort to bring the government closer to the people and have it serve them. In other words, the ultimate goal of the reforms is to reconnect and promote the relationship between the state and society (i.e. restoring trust between the state and citizens) after two decades of conflicts and social upheaval that destroyed the social fabric and state-society relations (Heng et al. 2011; Kim 2012; Heng & So 2012).

Communal activity, an alternative participation mode, is also seen as a key indicator to assess the evolution of citizen participation, particularly youth at the local level. This is because, over the last decade, it became evident that local and international non-government organisations have been working tirelessly to promote the participation of Cambodian youth in local governance so as to tackle communal issues through informal or alternative forms (for example, engaging in voluntary associations/social organisations).

This study does not cover the radical or unconventional forms of participation such as protests or demonstrations because they are not applicable to the current hybrid polity of Cambodia. Scholars (including Chandler 1996; 2000; Martin 1994; Hughes 2009) suggested that through the political past, the culture of social movements or mobilisation is uncommon in Cambodian society. Especially in the Khmer Rouge era, traditional associations and forms of collective action were atomised. Moreover, during the 1990s and 2000s, there has been documented evidence of government institutional suppression and violent crackdown on social and political movements (Hughes 2009).

5

METHODOLOGY

Fieldwork for the study was carried out from September 2013 to February 2014 in four communes in three provinces, Prey Veng, Kompong Cham and Battambang. The sites were selected based on loose criteria of broad geographical variation, presence of local youth associations and existing rapport with local officials. Selection of the sites was not aimed at producing comparative case studies, but at a thematic analysis of local youth participation.

The study adopted a qualitative approach based on focus group discussions (FGDs) and semi-structure interviews. Two FGDs were attempted in each commune. One was conducted with youth organisation volunteers and one with youth not part of the networks to explore the perspectives of young people with varying degrees of social experience. In practice, the research team encountered some difficulties in assembling the latter group with the minimum number of participants due to time availability. This shortcoming was rectified by a change to individual interviews. In sum, two FGDs (in Prey Veng and Kompong Cham) with youth organisation volunteers and one FGD (in Kompong Cham) with those not part of the networks were completed. The number of youth participating in each discussion ranged from four to six, equally divided by gender.

Separate individual interviews were undertaken with commune chiefs and councillors, village chiefs, youth and local youth organisation representatives. Attempts were also made to interview national youth organisation leaders and government officials depending on time availability. The process was useful in assisting the research team in designing the research framework and formulating interview questions. In total, 33 individual interviews were held. Secondary sources, including books, journal articles, reports and studies, were extensively reviewed to understand theoretical and empirical perspectives on political participation and youth dynamics. Verifying and cross-checking the information collected was done with other respondents and reliable printed materials to ensure accuracy. A number of surveys supply important data on youth participation in Cambodia, on which the study aims to build to provide more detailed description.

The study is exploratory in nature with a limitation of disaggregated data (e.g. gender, economic status, education, political affiliation, geographical locations) due to the methods used and the number of informants interviewed. It was not intended to be a comprehensive examination. Rather, it is aimed at highlighting key thematic issues to serve as a foundation for further research and contribute to debates on youth development in Cambodia.

6

FINDINGS

6.1. Civic Participation: Contributing to Public Good

Non-government organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs), among them youth organisations or associations, as the link between local government and citizens, are considered essential in enhancing state accountability (Kim & Öjendal 2007). In our field research, commune chiefs generally had positive views of youth and youth organisations, expressing that youth have an important role to play, and that youth organisations are good development partners, so their activities are welcomed in the communes even though this reception was preceded by uneasy relationships characterised by reluctance and scepticism. This section will look at youth membership in CBOs⁶ or local associations and participation in voluntary activities.

Association

By the mid-2000s, CBOs had been created in every village in Cambodia (Öjendal 2013: 27). The organisations serve to pool citizen voices, address collective needs and demand local accountability, but previous surveys found that young people have minimal roles in these organisations, whose chiefs and deputies are normally the really active people (Kim & Öjendal 2007: 41). A 2010 UNDP survey of 2,000 young people aged between 15 and 24 revealed a low membership in community groups (21 percent) and youth associations (14 percent) (UNDP 2010: 85). The findings are consistent with an earlier survey by the Center for Advanced Study (CAS) (2007, in Malena & Chhim 2009: 42) which indicated loose associations with civil society organisations by young people aged 18 to 30 (26 percent). The survey further suggested that the majority (70 percent) of those who do belong to an organisation associate with traditional groups which are loose and informal associations linked with pagodas (Malena & Chhim 2009: 42).

Recent fieldwork also observed that youth have limited awareness of CBOs or local associations and few links with these organisations. However, the need to improve living standards has driven young people to join mandated associations (cf. Kim & Ann 2005) like agriculture or saving groups that are externally funded and supported to develop farming skills and promote access to finance. While livelihood problems can bring people together for mutual help, the same problems encourage considerable outward mobility for jobs, which renders young people's active engagement in associations rare. Malena and Chhim (2009: 43) suggested that people generally prefer to associate within the context of familiarity and trust that "allows enough flexibility to exit or opt out of group activities discreetly and without ruffling feathers". At a time when a growing number of young people look for jobs outside their communities, membership flexibility and easy exit would fit well for the increasingly mobile youth. Recalling the experience of youth mobilisation, a village chief in Battambang expressed her helplessness:

⁶ Some examples of CBOs include wat committees, school support committees, help for the aged associations, savings associations, road maintenance committees and water user associations (Kim & Öjendal 2007: 8).

The commune chief used to have an initiative to create a youth association but it has stagnated so far because we can't find young people to join on a permanent basis. They are busy with finding jobs and are always moving (I26).

A lack of support from parents is also a factor, though less obvious. A youth FGD participant in Kompong Cham expressed her view about the hindrance to other young people's participation:

Sometimes they want to join the youth organisation, but their parents don't allow it because they think that we are useless, hang out and don't use time efficiently. Some people don't understand; they think that we are free and don't have work to do. They don't know that what we do is good for the society that they live in (FG2).

Out of livelihood concerns, parents want their children to spend time wisely, preferably on activities that ease their household burdens and perhaps more crucially staying away from political activities that may bring "troubles" back home. Yet, experience showed that restrictions can be relaxed when there is popular approval for actions deemed meritorious. A youth organisation volunteer reflected on this experience:

Our parents didn't want us to join the youth network because they were afraid that the activities related to politics, but later they changed their minds because they saw what we did, and the organisation's coordinator invited them to join the meeting showcasing their children's achievements, and they felt proud of that (I19).

For those who are able and willing to pursue meaningful public life, youth organisations are a springboard. With an objective of empowering young people, youth organisations have been key to filling the gap in political socialisation. Youth volunteers—mostly with high school education and motivated by the desire for knowledge and experience enrichment—are organised into groups and mobilised to implement activities in target communes. The organisations have their volunteer recruitment process, but many joined under the influence of peers. The volunteers are provided with short-course training on topics such as citizenship, good governance, planning and report writing. The informal provision of knowledge spearheaded by civil society organisations gives young people an important exposure to democratic values and practices. Performing coordinated tasks under guidance the volunteering experience reportedly boosts young people's confidence and enthusiasm. A participant in a youth FGD in Kompong Cham said:

Before joining the organisation, we were hesitant to participate. The reasons were that we didn't know how to participate and didn't know the commune council, so we were afraid that they wouldn't allow us to join their meeting. In short, we were reluctant because we didn't know them. Now we dare to do it because we have the network (FG2).

Another youth expressed satisfaction:

Before I joined the organisation, I didn't have much knowledge and was fearful of the village chief and commune council. I perceived them as powerful people, as masters. After having been exposed for two years, now I perceive them as people's representatives (I19).

Arguably, political knowledge and socialisation and personal development are some of the qualities distinguishing the civically active from the uninvolved.

Good will from commune councils is imperative for youth organisations to implement their programmes, and this is contingent on rapport between the two parties, which was developed after a period of collaboration—said to be one or two years—in which commune councils garnered increased understanding of and trust in youth organisations’ non-partisan objectives. A youth organisation coordinator in Prey Veng recalled that at the outset commune councils did not welcome the ideas of work or training related to such issues as democracy or human rights. Instead, they encouraged livelihood-related training. Commune councils were said to retain the mentality that non-government organisations with democracy or human rights agendas are more or less leaning towards the opposition party, thus having to be treated with caution. Trust building was also aided by youth organisations’ non-political legal status, which is generally successful in imparting an impression of independence and impartiality (I10).

Volunteering

Cambodia has a long history of reciprocal community relationships (Ebihara 1968; cf. Kim 2011; Marston 2011). After the civil war in the 1970s, volunteerism has been gradually resurrected, beginning with state-directed mass movements to support post-war relief efforts (Mysliwiec 2005:10). Advocating investment in youth development, Mysliwiec identified the rise of youth organisations—as a contemporary form of volunteerism—as an important means for young people to enrich their personal experience. In her survey of 215 university students, a third of the respondents reported some kind of volunteering experience (*ibid.* 13). The UNDP survey found a relatively high level of volunteerism (68 percent) among the 15-24 age group. Given low membership in grassroots organisations and youth associations, a multiplicity of volunteer activities is likely to occur outside these organisations (UNDP 2010: 85). Recent fieldwork identified village chiefs—who in most cases hold another role as chief of village party wing—as prominent mobilisers of youth volunteers. As a powerful local leader, a go-to person in the village (cf. Kim 2012: 97-10), village chiefs’ call for help—inextricable between communal and partisan interests—is likely to be heeded because people are unwilling to damage relationships with local officials by refusing to participate.

According to field information, grass-roots volunteer activities involving young people are said to include:

- contributing labour in infrastructure projects, rice planting and cultivation;
- gathering information from villagers and sharing it with commune councils;
- teaching children part-time;
- collecting voter data;
- night-time security patrols;
- raising awareness on voter registration, voting, citizenship and other social issues such as health, migration, domestic violence and environment.

As noted earlier, village chiefs have an important role in mobilising youth volunteers, but when we look into the usual kinds of activities, many simply need youth’s physical strength (e.g. repairing a road, guarding at night), undertaken without having empowerment as an objective. The objective in these cases is to get the job done.

Young people associated with youth organisations were said to be more active in volunteering. Youth who didn't belong to youth groups were observed to be less energetic and lacking in initiative due to the need to prioritise earning and a lack of enthusiasm. A 28-year-old in Battambang reflected on young people in his community: "They don't care much. They are busy with their work" (I15). Another youth added:

I think youth aren't really interested in community work because they are busy with study and have to help their parents with farming besides studying (I17).

A FGD participant from another study raised a similar issue:

We really wanted to involve [in] all the activities which could improve our villages but we cannot do since we have to earn income for our families and we also need to take care [of] our youngest sisters and brothers when our parents went to the forest, to fishing, etc (youth FGD, UNICEF EAPRO, 2008).

A lack of enthusiasm is another major cause of non-participation. A youth in Prey Veng said:

Other youth are not active. They say that we have too much free time to participate in NGO activities. I often ask my friends to join me, but they say that they are lazy and busy. They would rather stay at home and hang out (I20).

Although constrained by livelihood hardship and a deficiency of enthusiasm, youth are thought to be helpful and willing to contribute if mobilised or facilitated by others. This view reinforces this study's observation about the centrality of *bridging* to fostering greater youth activism. As a young woman in Kompong Cham frankly admitted:

I really want to engage in social activities, but I don't know how and where to get information about this. Also, no one has guided me on what I should do and where I should start. If the commune council or village chief shares information about NGOs coming to work here, I am happy to join, but they have never done so (I17).

That is, youth who have no or limited experience of volunteering do not necessarily shun the idea entirely; limited support mechanisms could have played a part in low volunteerism. The findings of Mysliwiec's study highlighted this, as a big majority (85 percent of respondents said that they would consider volunteering for one year "*provided that there was some means of support*") (Mysliwiec 2005:17; emphasis in original text).

In our fieldwork, an awkward experience was raised that deserved to be noted. Youth who have experience in awareness-raising activities with an explicit content related to democracy, good governance or human rights reported local authorities' discontent because they perceived the act as political. When asked how the situation was dealt with, a 24-year -old in Battambang who has knowledge of this experience said:

We get his [commune chief] trust by staying politically neutral. When there are events we invite him to attend and we don't say anything that affects him or his political party. We just do our work and explain to the people about the general principles of good governance, democracy, etc. (I13).

This approach was said to be effective in proving that awareness raising about these subjects is authentically for educational purposes and thus benefits from commune authorities' change

of attitude (I13). While the commune authority continues to disapprove political criticism, the fact that “authentic” education activities are “allowed” suggests that the community authorities might not be against the mainstreaming of these ideals and practices per se. Instead, they are more concerned about the far-reaching consequences of hidden political agendas. Insofar as partisan politics is deliberately removed from the conduct of civic activities, the promotion of citizenship or good governance is very likely to be tolerated by local leaders.

6.2. Political Engagement: Influencing Public Decision Making

This section examines more state-centred youth engagement, encompassing formal and informal contact with local officials for development and problem solving. Participation as a strategy of decentralisation, while perceived to enhance local democracy and development, has deviated from Cambodia’s prevailing political culture. The tensions engendered by the encounter of the state and citizens are, in Cambodia, cultural in nature. COMFREL (2009:13) found that only 6 percent of youth have participated in commune/*sangkat* council activities. This was confirmed by our fieldwork observation, and can be broadly explained by three main factors.

Firstly, the commune hall has historically been viewed as where people go only when they have problems or matters (which in Khmer can be *roeang*, *kar* or *pnhaha*) to be solved or facilitated by the authorities, ranging from civil registration to conflict resolution (I1, I19). In this sense, the commune hall is strictly a service delivery centre, not really a democratic space where citizens and elected representatives discuss and resolve community issues. This conception signifies a lack of cognitive closeness with the local state, thus negating the objective of “bringing government closer to the people” as idealised by the decentralisation design. The commune hall still largely radiates formalness and rigidity despite its spatial proximity and liberal building design.

Secondly, there is the mentality that social affairs or decision making is the responsibility of the authorities. This not-my-affair attitude reinforces the belief among young people that non-participation is not undesirable but necessary or normal. When assessing the general situation of youth participation, a monk volunteering for a youth organisation commented:

I think that 25 percent to 30 percent know that they can participate in meetings and the decision-making process of the commune, but the majority don’t know and don’t go because they say decision making is the job of the commune chief and deputy chiefs and thus not necessary for them to go and join (I14).

Finally, there is fear of the commune council and participation more broadly. A village chief in Kompong Cham, assessing youth participation, said that young people are disinterested in and fearful of participation. Most of them would rather avoid the “scene”. The cause, he suggested, is low education or lack of civic education more specifically; but he added that even those with grade 11 or 12 education are still fearful because they “are not good at speaking or asking” in public (I29). Said another village chief, young people are afraid of misspeaking or offering the wrong ideas (I28). A commune chief in Prey Veng spoke similarly. However, in addition to knowledge, he attributed the problem to the legacy of past repressive political systems (I32). This viewpoint resembles more closely that of young people whose conception of themselves and the commune authorities is pervaded by social hierarchy. “I am still fearful. We are the ordinary people, they are the commune authorities ... as a common member of the community, we don’t have any role to inform them”, responded a 24-year-old in Prey Veng when asked if he dares to propose suggestions to the commune council (I23). Another 26-year-old said

similarly: “Young people don’t have big jobs or big roles; it is more effective if the village chief proposes the suggestions” (I22).

Fear, nevertheless, is not the dominant sentiment, as a more progressive perception is also visible. While it is not uncommon for ordinary citizens to describe public leaders as *mae ou* (parents) or *anapyeabal* (custodians) who were traditionally conceived to have the power to control their subordinates, some youth associate “parents” with a distinctive role of being expected to be accountable and effectual. *neak dohsray pnhaha* (problem solver) and *neak domnang* (representative) are other identifications for the commune councils. These “soft” references, as argued by Öjendal and Kim (2006: 517-518), suggest a certain ontological shift whereby the local state is no longer seen as autocratic, which was typically assigned the title *roth omnach* (state authority), a terminology with a strong domineering and commanding connotation.

The pre-decentralisation communes were characterised by unaccountable and irresistible authority (and repression) (Öjendal & Kim 2006; Kim & Öjendal 2009; Heng & So 2012), but this was gradually transformed by heightened demands for public goods delivery, good governance and the safeguarding of public well-being. For instance, according to the UNDP survey (2010: 49), 62 percent of 2000 youth respondents reported that they were aware of the commune councils’ general mandate, namely protecting people, solving problems, building infrastructure and so forth. The awareness was confirmed by recent fieldwork. Further, in the context of electoral accountability and service delivery, “parents” can be and have to be punished by ballots if expectations are not adequately fulfilled or improper behaviours are identified. For these young people, the feeling towards local officials is more *respect* than *fear*. This is in line with Öjendal and Kim’s observation (2006: 157-158; cf. Kim & Öjendal 2009): “Villagers’ dealings with these authorities used to be characterised by *klach* [fear], and in good cases some *korob* [respect], but very little *kaud* [admiration]; now, there is a lot of *korob* and some *kaud*, but not so much *klach*”.

Formal Meetings and Informal Contacting

This section discusses interactions between young people and local officials, which include formal commune council meetings and village meetings and informal contacts with commune councillors and village chiefs.

Commune council meetings and village meetings are two platforms created under decentralisation for citizens to articulate their needs and advance responses. These participatory instruments are theorised to empower citizens and accelerate local development; yet in Cambodia the quality of participation has been hampered by cultural and administrative issues that render meetings between local officials and citizens largely informative or at best consultative (Heng et al. 2011; Malena & Chhim 2009; Plummer & Tritt 2013).

Commune council meetings are held monthly, attended by commune councillors, village chiefs and other stakeholders. Although they are formally open to the public, entrance to meetings is a controlled process. According to youth accounts, they personally asked the commune chief for permission to attend the council meeting, which was often granted verbally after some questions about where they were from (referring to their organisation) and what they wanted from the attendance. The most commonly cited purposes for attending the meeting are information exchange between villagers and council, familiarising with council activities and raising community issues for the council to resolve.

There were no reported rejections of participation requests, which match the affirmation of interviewed commune officials that they will accept requests to attend council meetings if there are any. However, a commune chief in Prey Veng clarified that those not invited will need to have clear reasons for attending; otherwise attendance will not be allowed (I31). The condition is likely linked to caution over potential critic capture of the meeting as a means to criticise the council or advance personal or political agendas. Positively, there were some instances of individual youths or youth organisations (who in turn send their youth volunteers) being invited to council meetings (I9), presumably after mutual understanding was established. A youth FGD participant in Kompong Cham mentioned his group's presence in council meetings and improved relationship with the commune council:

At first, we went only to listen. After having some understanding about the meeting, we dare to speak up about what we want. Now, after they know us, when there are trainings, they ask us to join. When they need people (e.g. information gathering about local needs and issues), they ask for our help. Now it is easy. When we are close to them we are not afraid of asking for their permission to campaign or use a place (FG2).

A commune chief in Prey Veng showed a preference for a more organised participation by expressing the wish to have a formal youth structure that represents young people in the commune so that its representatives can be invited to the monthly meeting (I31). With commune chief as the gatekeeper, the commune council meeting is essentially an “invited space”.

The notion of “invited space” is confirmed to be fairly widespread among young people. The CAS survey (in Malena & Chim 2009: 29) revealed why young people aged 18 to 30 do not participate in commune council meetings. The stand-out reason is the lack of time (42 percent), while other major reasons are the absence of a formal invitation (31 percent) and lack of information (31 percent). The lack of time was also often cited in our research because young people spend their time on either study or work. Also fairly observable in the field research was the lack of interest among young people, as perceived by local officials and youth who have attended commune council meetings (found by the CAS survey to be a rather small number, 5 percent). A village chief in Battambang suggested that young people feel that it is “useless” and “time wasting” to attend council meetings. He said that in his observation, youth are playful and preoccupied with leisure activities (I26). A participant in a youth FGD explained why council meetings are less appealing to young people:

They are active in activities such as campaigns or road construction, but they aren't interested in training or commune council meetings because they don't like to stay in one place (FG2).

The above view does not necessarily reflect the whole picture of youth's lack of interest in commune council meetings. A reason might be that the meeting agenda is irrelevant to youth's needs and interests. Thus further studies on the relevance of local politics to youth and youth's perspective on commune council agendas should be undertaken.

Another public meeting between commune authorities and citizens is the village meeting, which is part of the annual commune investment programme to determine development projects. The annual event is designed to operationalise the broader five-year commune development plan. Village meetings are held to identify citizens' needs, and per ministerial guideline require the

participation of at least 60 percent of all households and 30 percent as women. In practice, this quorum is seldom met.

Overall, it was observed that youth have poor awareness of the meetings, and the number of youth participants is negligible. The UNDP survey (2010: 76) found that only 4 percent of young people aged 15 to 24 had experience in decision making on commune plans. Our research also noted that the presence of youth is generally the result of their parents not being able to attend. Invitations to the meeting are usually forwarded to household heads, while young people are typically assumed to be occupied with study or work and unable to attend. This approach implies that their attendance is not really required or significant. That only household heads are invited does not contribute to increasing youth's understanding of participatory local planning. This issue is exacerbated by youth's conception of the meeting as an affair for the older generations.

Furthermore, there are varied views on the value of youth participation in village meetings. A village chief in Kompong Cham questioned the suitability of youth attending on the ground of their decision making ability:

I think parents should attend the meeting rather than their children because they know the family's needs, and if there is a need to make decision, they can do it. If youth attend the meeting on behalf of their parents, I think the issues are not covered because they know only their own needs, so they can't make decisions on behalf of their parents (I27).

Another village chief in Battambang entertained this view (I24), but it was less welcoming from the perspective of young people themselves. A 24-year-old in Battambang disputed the idea of not involving youth in development planning by claiming that doing so would improve their understanding of the commune plan, which could in turn enable them to assist the commune councils (I13). Her argument was vindicated by positive cases of councils seeking to incorporate activities or opinions of youth organisation volunteers into their investment programmes. A youth organisation coordinator in Kompong Cham indicated that commune councils always ask the youth groups about their planned activities and compare them with commune plans to identify gaps (I9). The 24-year-old herself said that her group's project on awareness-raising on alcohol consumption was included in the recent commune plan to be submitted to the district integration workshop (I13).⁷

Besides formal interactions, the field research looked at informal contacts between youth and local officials, which were largely absent, although young people agreed that their relations with commune and village chiefs are good. The rareness of informal interaction was confirmed by interviews with the village chiefs, who attributed it to "having nothing to interact on with each other" (I22, I23, I24, I26, I27, I28, I29) Youth who engage with commune councils usually bypass village chiefs and approach the commune chief directly when necessary (FG2). In general, Hughes (2005, in Kim & Ann 2005: 11) observed that contact with state officials is considered "threatening and to be avoided if possible," unless for the purpose of "friendship relations".

⁷ The proposed plan did not materialise because the youth group in the commune had since disbanded as some got married and others migrated to work in Thailand.

Petitioning

Written petitions are another means to demand state accountability and responsiveness. In rural Cambodia where confrontation with authority is uncommon because of the desire for harmony and fear of reprisals, petitioning as a method of voicing demands is rare. Our field research found that issues are generally raised orally although there are a few odd cases of petitions being used (see Box 1 for an example). A youth FGD reported experience in submitting petitions to the commune councils to have rural roads constructed. It is suggested that the chance of petitions being accepted depends on the relationships between the councils and youth. A FGD participant said:

The communes that value youth greatly listen to us and discuss with us about what to do. Communes that don't value youth much don't think that youth come to help. Instead, they think that youth want recognition and put pressure on the councils (FG1).

The method they used when requests were not accepted by the councils was to mobilise villagers by getting their thumbprints to demonstrate that the particular issue was reflective of the general concern, not youth's personal agenda (FG1).

Box 1.

Buoyed by encouragement and support from her youth organisation, villagers and more importantly the commune council, Theory (not her real name) and several other young volunteers in a youth group in 2010 initiated a petition to solve a dispute involving villagers and the son of a former district governor. The latter was fencing in his land and encroached on the village's public road. Theory and her colleagues were approached by several affected villagers when they visited the village. After the approach, she decided to give it a try. They got a petition form from the youth organisation and managed to get the thumbprints of 75 households. The petition was submitted to the commune council, though the council was not able to help given the nature of the issue. The dispute eventually reached the provincial government, which assigned the district government to settle the dispute a year later. Recalling the event, the 29-year-old—then the youth group leader—said that she was intimidated by the influential person but still decided to do it. “If we don't enter the cave, how can we catch the tiger?”, said Theory, referring to a Khmer saying.

The case of Theory exemplifies how personal character can determine participation practices. Perhaps more importantly, external support from NGOs is usually the source of that strength.

6.3. Electoral Participation: Choosing Local Representatives

Election, which is a formal process in modern representative democracies, entails a variety of activities that could finally lead to the selection of political parties or individuals to hold public office. Its two main activities seem to be outstanding in debates about elections: voting and campaigning. How do youth view their engagement campaigns and participation in voting?

Voting

The first national elections in Cambodia were organised in 1993 by the United Nations as part of creating civil government and restoring peace and stability after decades of civil war. The first commune elections were held in 2002 under the framework of the decentralisation reform, aiming to provide substantial autonomy to local governments so that commune councils could better represent the interests of the people. Since then, commune elections in 2007 and 2012

have been conducted. These elections not only allow youth to select their local leaders, but also give youth the opportunity to be elected to commune councils.

The number of registered voters in commune elections has increased over the years, from 6.2 million in 2002 (COMFREL 2012: 43), to 8.1 million in 2007 and 9.6 million in 2012 (see Table 1). It was estimated that in 2012, 37 percent were aged 18-30, making up the largest cohort. According to COMFREL (2012: 49), young new registered voters have increased at a rate of 300,000 per year since 2008.

Table 2: Registered Voter List

Age range	2007			Age range	2012		
	#	F %	%		#	F %	%
18-35	4356256	28	54	18-30	3534673	19	37
36-45	1576652	10	19	31-45	3337574	18	34
46-55	1111981	8	14	46+	2803206	16	29
56-65	649102	5	8	Total	9675453	53	100
66+	431538	3	5				
Total	8125529	54	100				

Source: National Election Committee

The number of youth candidates (over 25) being elected to the commune councils has also increased over time. In 2007, 163 youth candidates were elected or 1.43 percent of the total 11,353 elected councillors; in the 2012 commune election, 615 youth candidates (293 women) were elected, making up 5 percent of the 11,459 councillors. Among the 615 youth councillors, the ruling CPP had the biggest number, 423 councillors and 16 commune chiefs. The SRP won the second place with 145 elected councillors, two of whom hold the commune chief position. The HRP has 39 youth councillors, Funcinpec has 4, the NRP has 1 and the LDP 3 (COMFREL 2012: 50). However, a national informant commented that the proportion of youth candidates for commune council election remains very low relative to other countries. As a consequence of the closed list proportional electoral system, there is also the issue of youth being placed lower in the candidate lists and thus being less likely to be elected. The cause, he said, is political parties' reluctance to promote youth. "It is a danger that we have to confront", he added (I1).

These improvements are overwhelmingly supported by the general electorate. A survey with 1752 voting-age Cambodians conducted by Serpe (2013) found that 86 percent are happy to see those aged 18-30 having more of a role in how the country is governed, and 92 percent are highly supportive of the increasing proportion of youth in the National Assembly and commune councils.

Field interviews and FGDs reveal general enthusiasm about youth participation in elections and their right and responsibility to choose their leaders. This enthusiasm is associated with youth's familiarity with the electoral process and the increasingly improved political environment.⁸ Youth see voting as a chance to decide on the type of leaders they want and demand more development in the country and community. There is a consensus among youth regarding this perspective. For

⁸ Since the election in 1993, the number of politically motivated murders has decreased. In 1993 there were reported 380 murders of political activists or members, and this figure dropped to 40 in 1998, 18 in 2002, 28 in 2003, 9 in 2007, 28 in 2008 and 3 in 2012 (COMFREL 2012: 16).

example, a youth FGD participant in Prey Veng said: “We vote because we want a good leader. It is important because people have the right to choose the leader they like” (FG1).

The responsibility of a citizen to vote has also been noted. Though this might be a minority view, it shows increasing knowledge of democracy. In a youth FGD in Prey Veng, a participant said, “If we do not go to vote, it means that we are not Khmer” (FG1). Another youth, in Kompong Cham, expressed a similar opinion: “Voting is the people’s responsibility to choose the leader that they like to develop the country” (FG2). A village chief in Prey Veng also observed that although the majority of youth in his village have migrated to urban areas to work, they returned home to cast their votes in every election, excepting those working in faraway provinces or Thailand (I23). This reflects youth’s acceptance of elections.

Moreover, recent fieldwork found that young people can vote simply to “be like others” (*doch khe doch eng*) (I18, I15). According to this anecdotal evidence, voting is showing signs of becoming a *norm*, a result of conforming to social trends. In a sense, the act of voting is intuitive or not requiring many reasons.

While there is a consensus among youth that casting a ballot is to select a good leader for the development of the country and the community and to exercise their right and obligation as citizens, their decision on which party to vote for seems to involve more effort and knowledge about politics. Information and knowledge about local development, infrastructure, parties’ political platforms and policies, leadership and ability to fulfil promises is important for their decision. A 28-year-old in Battambang said: “We decide to vote for [the party] by looking at the progress of our community” (I15). Another youth claimed:

I decided who to vote for by looking at the vision and policy. I follow and analyse the benefits they may offer us, or why we should vote for them. We vote to get benefits. I listen to all [political] parties. I think my vote is significant because I can vote for the right candidate even though s/he was not elected; I think it was a right and responsible decision (I13).

Another young voter shared a similar view:

I vote because I need to choose a good leader to improve the country, by looking at their activities, what they have done such as infrastructure, road construction and looking at security in my community. My vote is very important as I can choose the person I like (I16).

Efforts of youth to understand platforms, achievements and ability to deliver on promises are really interesting for investigation. Voters need to be informed about this in one way or another.

However, information and knowledge about political parties’ platforms and other activities, which serve as the basis for their decision, remain limited. The survey by Serpe (2013) found that those in the youngest age group (18-24) had the highest percentage reporting a need for more information on each electoral aspect. The next youngest age group (25-34) also expressed a disproportionately high need for more information. This suggests public information campaigns ought to ensure that they appropriately target younger citizens (Serpe 2013). Our fieldwork confirmed these findings. Except youth belonging to political party wings, the majority of youth interviewed were unaware of political party platforms.

Given social acceptance of youth’s role and their enthusiasm in elections, this study does not downplay issues that restrain youth from participating in elections. The survey conducted by UNDP (2010: 15) found that in the 2007 commune elections, of those aged 21 and up, 53

percent did not vote. The main reasons were practical, such as not eligible,⁹ name not on the list, busy at home or workplace or living far from the commune office (*ibid.* 15). A similar result was found in the 2012 commune elections. In a post-election survey, COMFREL found that 46 percent of 2536 people who did not vote were youth (18-35). Among them, 42 percent had not registered because of a lack of identity documents or awareness of voter registration or change of residence, while the remainder identified a lack of confidence in the election and its perceived insignificance as reasons for not voting (COMFREL 2012: 50).¹⁰

Campaigning

While casting ballots at polling stations might be seen as safe for the voters, campaigning for a political party seems to be politically sensitive and thus might eventually cause harm to one's self. The scale of politically motivated murder has decreased since the early 1990s and the absence of violent reprisals caused by political campaigning and involvement prior to recent elections should have strengthened popular belief in the maturity of political contests in Cambodia. The "fear" culture regarding involvement in politics remains strong, including among youth, and it is often associated with the legacy of the violent past. Politics remains a dangerous affair and thus not for those who are not close to the political party (Mom 2008; Osborne 2007; LICADHO 2014). This might be truer of open political acts such as campaigning than of behind-the-scenes involvement.

Where electoral campaigning is visible support for one political party against other parties, taking part seems to cause insecurity if political patronage determines career opportunities and economic advancement in the public sector and business; visible protest against the dominant party would risk future careers and economic opportunities. Data from fieldwork suggest that youth participation in electoral campaigns remains limited and challenging. A 24-year-old student volunteering for a youth NGO had real consciousness of the discrimination, saying:

I did not join any election campaign because I can't show that I support another political party, because it would be difficult to work with the commune authority (I13).

In a youth FGD, the six participants shared a similar opinion:

We did not participate in political campaigns because, as youth organisation volunteers, we are unbiased and non-partisan. If we go to campaigns, the people and commune councillors will think that we are from a political party; so when we do awareness raising, they will think that we are campaigning for a political party (FG2).

Another youth added:

I did the election awareness campaign, not party campaign, because if I did party campaigning, people would think that I was not impartial (I19).

Such a politically sensitive topic might fit well only with "party youth". Youth belonging to political parties can explicitly express their support through their direct involvement in party activities in campaigns.

⁹ "Registering to vote occurs as part of the process of organising elections in Cambodia. So while all people with Cambodian citizenship who are aged 18 or older are eligible to vote, the opportunity to register to vote in the last commune council elections may not yet have occurred for respondents who were aged 21 at the time of survey but who were not yet 18 at the time of voter registration" (UNDP 2010: 15).

¹⁰ According to Asian Barometer Wave II and Wave III survey (cited in Chang 2012: 20), youth turnout rates in most East Asian countries has been in serious decline except for South Korea, Mongolia and Vietnam.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

With the purpose of understanding the contribution of decentralisation to youth participation in local rural governance, this study explored empirically how youth have utilised the participatory opportunities provided by looking at three themes: civic, political and electoral. The findings suggest that youth participation in local rural governance in general and development planning in particular has been limited. When they do engage, their activities are often triggered or facilitated by intermediaries (youth associations, commune councils and village chiefs). Given that dependence, it can be argued that youth still lack courage and remain passive without intermediaries.

Civic Participation

Youth have limited knowledge of CBOs or local associations and loose engagement with these organisations. Volunteering gains more youth involvement. Given subdued CBOs, village chiefs play a prominent role in mobilising youth volunteers (for communal and/or partisan interests). Economic, cultural and personal reasons underlie a lack of broad youth engagement in associations and volunteering. The need for higher income has driven many young people to become increasingly mobile and work outside their communities. The issue is compounded by a lack of enthusiasm and restrictions from parents. However, a lack of supporting mechanisms is a stumbling block for those who want to be more civically engaged but are not sure of how to start. Youth organisations were identified as an important participation catalyst. Their engagement mechanisms have provided youth with opportunities to improve political knowledge and socialisation experience, which are likely factors distinguishing the more active from the less active. Good relationships with commune authorities are crucial for this process.

Political Engagement

Apathy, deference, distance and fear are manifestations of Cambodia's hierarchical social norms and continue to pervade relationships between the government and the governed. For some youth, however, the feeling towards local officials is more respect than fear, in that commune authorities now can be vulnerable to being voted out. The opening of political space means that youth can influence public decisions through formal meetings like commune council and village meetings and informal contacts with local officials. But use of these rights has been limited, mostly to NGO-affiliated youth. Although there were no reported rejections of attendance requests, the formally public monthly commune council meeting is an "invited space". When young people attend village meetings, they do so as representatives of their parents. Youth's peripheral role in the participatory planning exercise renders this activity essentially an affair for old people. Youth participation in village meetings invites diverging views on its suitability. In spite of the difference, positive cases exist of commune councils integrating youth ideas and activities into commune plans. Informal contacts with local officials and written petitions, on the other hand, are rare.

Electoral Participation

Recent fieldwork noted that young people are generally enthusiastic about voting, seeing it as a right and responsibility to choose good leaders and spur more development in their communities. It was also observed that voting is showing signs of becoming a norm, a result of conforming to social trends. The number of new young registered voters has increased significantly. However, the proportions of youth who did not vote in the last two commune council elections were high due predominantly to practical reasons. The proportion of elected youth commune councillors has risen almost fourfold, from 1 percent in 2007 to 5 percent in 2012. These developments are overwhelmingly welcomed by the public. In terms of which political party to vote for, youth decide by looking at the progress in local development, party platforms and leadership and their ability to fulfil promises. The information is received primarily through the broadcast media and electoral campaigns. However, young people require more information about political parties to make better decisions. While voting is a popular democratic exercise, joining electoral campaigns is a sensitive issue, particularly for youth organisation volunteers, who have to stick to their affiliating organisations' non-partisan status and are not willing to jeopardise their working relationship with local officials.

8

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The goal of the decentralisation reform in Cambodia is twofold: (1) the improvement of local development through enhancing local service delivery, and (2) the promotion of local democracy. To realise these goals, citizen participation is critically important. Litvack and Seddon (1999: 17) argued that citizen participation or involvement was not only “a means to” but also “a goal of (successful) democratic decentralisation”.

Despite the implementation of decentralisation for more than a decade, citizen participation in general remains low. Our recent fieldwork suggests that there is also a low level of participation among the younger generation (18-30). Low youth participation is worrisome because many have long argued for the important role of youth participation. For instance, Chang (2012: 10) argued that “... the decreasing level of youth participation not only endangers the democratic representativeness of today, but also jeopardises the democracy of tomorrow”. This study suggests that the citizen engagement objectives of decentralisation have often run up against political, economic, cultural and personal barriers. Politically, inadequacies of the elected commune councillors mean that they remain secondary to non-governmental intermediaries in the bridging role. None of the communes we visited has a plan to make their agenda more attractive to youth and include more youth in local rural governance. Effective implementation of national youth policy may improve the status quo. But as of now, the role of youth associations remains vitally important.

Nevertheless, as empirical evidence shows, the challenges were accompanied by positives, albeit unevenly. Without downplaying the changing local political landscape, this study makes the following conclusions with regard to the contribution of decentralisation to youth participation in local rural governance.

First, the contribution of the reform has been most observable in the electoral process. As youth form the largest cohort of the electorate, their voices are decisive in determining local political configurations. Furthermore, commune council elections provide capable youth the opportunity to become local leaders, thus shaping development outcomes in their communities. These are empowering circumstances facilitated by decentralisation.

Second, the commune councils’ enhanced working relationships with youth organisations and other non-governmental intermediaries has created a more embracing local political environment conducive to nurturing a culture of participation. This study acknowledges the role of youth associations in helping not only to promote youth participation in local communities, but also to improve youth’s civic and political knowledge and socialisation experiences through volunteer activities and training. Since the opening of Cambodia’s political system in 1993, the number of NGOs and civil society organisations has increased significantly, operating throughout the country to help promote development and democracy. Noticeably, since the implementation of the decentralisation reform in 2002, there have been a number of NGOs and civil society organisations engaged in activities to empower citizens to benefit from democratisation and the reform. A number of youth associations have been working locally to instil a sense of responsibility in young people with the aim of helping them to develop themselves and their communities.

Lastly, decentralisation has necessitated a gradual shift of relations between commune councils and youth characterised by more respect and less fear. The change stems from increased familiarity with the assigned roles and duties of commune councils, which entail representing the interests and fulfilling the needs of the people. The knowledge creates performance expectations that put social pressure on representatives to deliver satisfactory outcomes. If the expectation is not met, their incumbency will be challenged on election day. The improved relations connect youth more closely to their local representatives and thus deepen their interactions.

With insights from the empirical study, we conclude that the challenge of decentralisation is to deepen youth participation in both civic and political space. The process has to emphasise both the role of locally elected representatives and civil society, which, we argue, can accelerate the impact of decentralisation by addressing the cultural and personal barriers to participation. This responsibility will fall mainly on the shoulders of political leaders, policy makers and the older generations, who can help shape the younger generations into Cambodia's greatest resource for the future. It will not be easy, but the following recommendations could help them realise their potentials and thus actively engage in society.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

9.1. Policy Recommendations

Further deepening youth participation, in both civic and political space, will require at least the following.

First, the government should speed up implementation of the National Policy on Youth Development. Although this policy was adopted in 2011, the pace of implementation has been slow. Without doubt, the effective implementation of this policy not only helps provide youth a platform where their roles are recognised, and they can formally participate in local development and decision making, but also helps address the challenges (such as low education/skills and unemployment) viewed as a critical barrier to youth participation.

Second, roles of youth in decentralisation should particularly be spelled out in both the Law on Administration and Management of Communes/*Sangkats* and the Law on Administration (2002) and Management of the Capital, Provinces, Municipalities, Districts and *Khans* (2009). Since Cambodian youth have become politically, economically and socially important in the country, trying to engage them formally as much as possible in decentralisation would be advantageous to the community and society as a whole.

Third, before making policy recommendations on youth participation in decentralisation, more studies should be done by the government, political parties or NGOs in order to understand the relevance of local government to youth concerns and to serve them better, such as:

- challenges and needs of youth, and the institutions that can possibly address those challenges and needs;
- to what extent commune councils can address youth's problems and needs;
- to what extent commune councils can function as the link between upper level governments and youth in providing information such as study and employment opportunities;
- how substantial and relevant commune council agendas is to youth's interests and needs;
- youth's perceptions of commune council plans and political party platforms.

9.2. Agenda for Future Research

As this study was exploratory, a number of future studies are needed to get a fuller picture of youth participation. Future studies should include:

1. a more systematic study of the impact of gender, economic status, geographical location, education, political affiliation, family background on youth participation;
2. a study of the effect of formal and informal citizenship education on youth participation;
3. a study on youth engagement in political parties or patronage networks.

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Interview References

Code	Description	Date
FG1	Focus group with youth association volunteers in Prey Veng	5 September 2013
FG2	Focus group with youth association volunteers in Kompong Cham	9 October 2013
FG3	Focus group with youth in Kompong Cham	7 February 2014
I1	Interview with National Commune/Sangkat League	22 October 2013
I2	Interview with General Department of Youth, MoEYS	16 September 2013
I3	Interview with youth NGO 1	26 August 2013
I4	Interview with youth NGO 2	9 August 2013
I5	Interview with youth NGO 3	27 August 2013
I6	Interview with youth NGO 4	22 July 2013
I7	Interview with youth NGO 5	22 July 2013
I8	Interview with local youth NGO in Battambang	11 November 2013
I9	Interview with local youth NGO in Kompong Cham	8 October 2013
I10	Interview with local youth NGO in Prey Veng	6 September 2013
I11	Interview with youth in Prey Veng	28 January 2014
I12	Interview with youth in Prey Veng	28 January 2014
I13	Interview with youth in Battambang	12 November 2013
I14	Interview with monk in Battambang	12 November 2013
I15	Interview with youth in Battambang	11 November 2013
I16	Interview with youth in Kompong Cham	9 October 2013
I17	Interview with youth in Kompong Cham	10 October 2013
I18	Interview with youth in Kompong Cham	10 October 2013
I19	Interview with youth in Kompong Cham	8 October 2013
I20	Interview with youth in Prey Veng	5 September 2013
I21	Interview with youth in Prey Veng	5 September 2013
I22	Interview with village chief in Prey Veng	28 January 2014
I23	Interview with village chief in Prey Veng	28 January 2014
I24	Interview with village chief in Battambang	12 November 2013
I25	Interview with commune chief in Battambang	11 November 2013
I26	Interview with village chief in Battambang	12 November 2013
I27	Interview with village chief in Kompong Cham	8 October 2013
I28	Interview with village chief in Kompong Cham	10 October 2013
I29	Interview with village chief in Kompong Cham	9 October 2013
I30	Interview with commune councillor in Kompong Cham	8 October 2013
I31	Interview with commune chief in Prey Veng	4 September 2013
I32	Interview with commune chief in Prey Veng	5 September 2013
I33	Interview with commune councillor in Prey Veng	5 September 2013

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