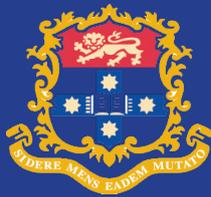




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Policy brief

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DECENTRALISED GOVERNANCE OF IRRIGATION WATER IN CAMBODIA: MATCHING PRINCIPLES TO LOCAL REALITIES¹

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THE PROBLEM

The ideals and assumptions that come with Cambodian governance initiatives, Participatory Irrigation Management and Development (PIMD) and Irrigation Management Transfer (IMT), are not being met at the implementation level. Although Farmer Water User Communities (FWUCs) are being established, failure to provide adequate and effective support, training and finances to these newly established bodies has brought about a serious mismatch between what they can achieve with their limited technical and financial capacity and the extent of their mandated roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, the success of the development philosophy of decentralisation and deconcentration and enhanced local participation in the rural Cambodian context is inhibited by the historic experiences of the people and by embedded cultural norms.

These two key problems have led to the manifestation of idealised theoretical governance policies at the implementation level, whereby FWUCs have to a large extent become inefficient and dependent extensions of the line ministries

as opposed to independent and sustainable local governance bodies.

BACKGROUND

- Irrigation governance in Cambodia has two primary objectives: first, water needs to reach the places and the people it is supposed to in a predictable way, in sufficient quantities and at the right time. Second, the infrastructure needs to be designed, provided and importantly, maintained so that it continues to deliver livelihood benefits in an equitable manner.
- The movement of Cambodia’s development policy framework towards decentralisation is manifested at irrigation scheme level by Farmer Water User Communities (FWUCs). This local body was designed to take on the primary governance role, in partnership with the Provincial Departments of Water Resources and Meteorology (PDOWRAM) on the one hand, and beneficiary farmers on the other.
- All irrigation schemes are physically and socially discrete; the differences between them

1 This policy brief is based on the CDRI working paper by Chea Chou *et al.* (forthcoming): “Decentralised Governance of Irrigation Water in Cambodia: Matching Principles to Local Realities”.

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evoke mixed experiences in the successes and failures of governance and scheme management. Despite these differences, some issues and experiences are common to many schemes.

- Governance challenges for FWUCs include participation, transparency, decentralisation, integrated water resource management (IWRM) and a move towards 'user-pays' based financing.
- There is a lack of congruence between the governance structure and the physical structure of irrigation schemes which is resulting in inefficiencies and system failures.
- Actual governance practice does not match the ideal, theorised mandates of governance bodies as they are written in policy.
- Adjustments to the PIMD policy and implementation guidelines need to be made in response to cultural and structural (i.e. governance structures) issues that are currently being experienced.

RESEARCH METHOD

Three schemes were chosen for case study based on their physical characteristics and development circumstances which are representative of the many irrigation schemes in the greater Tonle Sap region. The three schemes are Rolous and Stueng Chinith in Kompong Thom province and Damnak Ampil (DAP) in Pursat province. Stakeholder interviews and group discussions were held in each of the provinces. The stakeholders included: farmers, village leaders, commune councillors, FWUC leaders and PDOWRAM representatives. Interviews were conducted over four years and in varying levels of privacy (i.e. individual farmer interviews with no officials present, and group interviews with FWUC leaders, commune council (CC) members and PDOWRAM representatives present). This qualitative data was analysed giving consideration to the context in which it was gathered so as to

detect and factor-in any potential influence of hierarchical pressures on interviewees' responses.

KEY FINDINGS

Ideal and Actual Governance Mismatch

The level of FWUC activity varied substantially across the three case-study schemes; however, in all of the schemes, the actual roles of the FWUCs fell short of those that were mandated and were not particularly well executed. The strongest role of the FWUC committee across the different case-study schemes was of a mediator. Farmers reported issues regarding water allocation, infrastructure, and conflicts to their FWUC committee, who in turn would more often than not report the problem to the PDOWRAM which would design a solution and feed instructions back to the FWUC. Even as mediators, it was reported that the response time to farmers' requests was often unsatisfactory. Other notable roles carried out by the FWUCs were water allocation from main and secondary canals, resolution of minor conflicts between farmers within communities, and organising ISF collection (though not in DAP). The FWUC committees held little authority within their respective schemes and furthermore, were not fully aware of the extent of their mandate, especially in relation to that of the CC. Consequently considerable diffusion of responsibility was observed, both among FWUC members and CCs alike.

PDOWRAMs play an important role in providing technical, and to a lesser extent, financial support to FWUCs, particularly in regards to water allocation. However, as was seen in DAP, their close support is not necessarily helping the FWUCs become more independent. On the contrary, the DAP FWUC is highly dependent on PDOWRAM and consults them on every water allocation decision. The results suggest that in addition to their practical deficiencies, FWUCs struggle to operate within the firmly embedded, pre-existing traditional governance structure and the cultural patron-client hierarchy.

Physical and Governance Mismatch

It was evident in each of the case-study schemes that the scale of the command area was much too large for the human resources, technical and financial capacity of the FWUCs. They are not equipped with adequate technical training or financial capital to repair, develop and maintain infrastructure across the schemes, which in two out of three cases were greater than 100 ha. Each FWUC consisted of fewer than 10 people, and in practice there were generally five or less active FWUC members. The PIMD policy paper states that Farmer Water User Groups (FWUGs) are supposed to support FWUCs in dealing with the most minor problems (i.e. individual rice fields and tertiary canals); however they often existed only in name and served no coordinated function. Regions within the irrigation schemes were given little to no attention by the FWUCs, most notably so in the south-western region of Rolous where farmers' trust in the FWUC's commitment to scheme management was consequently low.

Local Participation

Central to the success of PIMD implementation is local participation in irrigation scheme management. Local participation in FWUC activities such as elections and meetings was, while variable between schemes, generally low and it was frequently reported that farmers did not have much faith in the FWUC as a capable governance body for the scheme. Participation in infrastructure maintenance was also low, indicating that farmers lacked a sense of ownership and responsibility for the scheme infrastructure, some reporting that they believed it was the role of the FWUC to attend to such maintenance tasks.

Irrigation service fee (ISF) contributions varied significantly across the schemes: none was collected in DAP, 30 percent of households contributed in the Rolous scheme, whereas 100 percent of irrigation scheme beneficiaries contributed in the Stung Chinith scheme. The overall sentiment expressed by farmers was that they would be willing to contribute ISF if their

requests were responded to and if they directly benefited from the work of the FWUCs. Some farmers interviewed in DAP demonstrated that not everyone understands the purpose of the ISF, believing it was payment for physical water rather than for the development, operation and maintenance of the irrigation scheme infrastructure.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Change must be enacted through various stakeholders at local and larger-than-local level to reduce the lack of congruence between the ideal and actual governance practice as well as between the physical size of the scheme and the governance system design. Reducing this mismatch will result in greater agricultural productivity, improved livelihoods and allow faster progress towards the national goals of irrigation development and poverty reduction.

At Local Level:

- Integrate FWUCs into the existing power structure within the community through the nomination of group leaders, village chiefs, and commune councillors (i.e., existing local governance system) or traditional leaders (e.g., achar, former local state leaders, elders) and other outspoken individuals with leadership quality in the FWUCs to embrace the patron-client relationship already embedded in Cambodian culture.
- Mobilise farmers into functional FWUGs, the leaders of which must be integrated into the FWUC.
- Diminish the physical expanse of command areas or increase the size of the FWUC strategically, taking representatives from different communes and villages across the scheme.
- Implement more extensive and intensive knowledge dissemination about the farmers' rights and responsibilities in regards to the

irrigation scheme and its management as drafted in the PIMD policy to nurture a sense of ownership and willingness to participate in farmers.

- Increase knowledge dissemination about the purpose and necessity of ISF contributions from all farmers.
- Foster greater non-formal communication between FWUCs and farmers to build greater trust in the governance body and social capacity within the scheme.

At Sub-national Level (including NGOs):

- Enforce the development of realistic exit strategies by donor agencies at the initiation of projects so as to ensure the sustainability of schemes once donor funding has finished.
- Unify administration through encouraging, legislating and enforcing greater involvement and commitment from governance bodies at the provincial and district levels to coordinate schemes and manage issues that concern water sharing at catchment scale (i.e., between upstream and downstream users). This engagement with the mainstream government system has to be conceived as a long-term process to advance institutional changes within the government system.
- Undertake greater knowledge dissemination about local hydrology to FWUCs and other local authorities to assist in the environmentally responsible and agriculturally effective allocation of water.

At National Level:

- Alignment of policy and greater coordination across different line ministries needs to be strongly considered because of the complexity of water as a flowing and inter-connected substance physically, economically, socially, and environmentally. This makes its mode of governance more complex and multi-disciplinary than might have been assumed when the current governance policy was drafted.