



CATCHMENT GOVERNANCE AND COOPERATION DILEMMAS: A CASE STUDY FROM CAMBODIA¹

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KEY MESSAGES

- A catchment or river basin refers to an area of land that is drained by a single river and its tributaries. Integral to the health of a catchment are elements such as soil, water, wildlife and vegetation, all of which form a life support ecosystem.
- Modern global catchment governance policy has turned to the theory of Integrated Catchment Management (ICM) in the last three decades. Such policy is soon to be introduced in Cambodia as a means to achieve sustainable water resources management at catchment level. This approach recognises the importance of cooperation between all stakeholders within a catchment, based on the perspective that a catchment is a relevant territorial space which cuts across pre-existing administrative boundaries containing different groups of users and governance systems (Batchelor 1999).
- Policies for the Water sector in Cambodia acknowledge, to some extent, the importance of cooperation among stakeholders. The Participatory Irrigation Management and Development (PIMD) policy, introduced in 1999, emphasises the need for participatory management, predominantly between irrigation water users and to a lesser extent, between different governance sectors (e.g. water, agriculture, forestry and fisheries). The new

Water Law, which came into enforcement in 2007, also refers to the need for cooperation between government and non-government stakeholders across sectors to effectively implement Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM).

THE PROBLEM

Moving towards adopting an ICM approach represents an attempt by the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) to adapt the IWRM approach at catchment level across the country. Cooperation is integral to ICM, not only between farmers, but also between stakeholders at higher levels of government from different sectors and administrative regions within a given catchment. Theoretically, ICM aims to develop a new governance body, namely a River Basin Committee (RBC), which would amalgamate all relevant agencies and stakeholders into one decision-making structure to foster multi-levelled cooperation (Abers & Keck 2006). ICM is to be introduced in Cambodia in a context where decentralisation and deconcentration (D&D)¹ reforms are in progress. The extent to which farmer groups and stakeholders within a catchment cooperate across sectors and boundaries is not well known.

This study investigates the gap between the ideal principles of ICM and the actual degree of current

1 This policy brief is based on the CDRI working paper by Ros Bandeth, Ly Tem and Anna Thompson (forthcoming): "Catchment Governance and Cooperation Dilemma: A Case Study from Cambodia".

2 Democratic Governance and Public Sector Reform Programme, CDRI.

3 Natural Resources and Environment Programme, CDRI

cooperation to identify ways in which ICM can be effectively integrated into Cambodia's water policy within the framework of D&D.

THE CASE STUDY

This research was carried out in a single catchment, Stung Chrey Bak, located in Tuek Phos and Rolea Bier districts in Kampong Chhnang province. This catchment was chosen due to the presence of multiple local groups sharing the same water source, as well as the involvement of district/provincial technical agencies from multiple departments in catchment management. The research team employed a qualitative approach using various data collection techniques, including key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation.

KEY FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal that a system of multi-level governance bodies, which serves to manage and administer cross-boundary issues, exists in Cambodia at commune, district and provincial levels. However, this system is not effective enough to meet the requirements of a River Basin Committee (RBC) as specified by ICM theory. Due to their lack of capacity and expertise, commune councils (CCs) and district/provincial offices are unable to address technical issues of catchment management. This requires cooperation from Line Offices (LOs) or Line Departments (LDs) which have some technical expertise and are mandated to manage specific elements within a catchment. The current establishment of unified administration at district and provincial levels under the Organic Law⁴ indicates the government's effort to re-mobilise and build cooperation between district/provincial offices, CCs and LOs/LDs.

Cambodian stakeholders across levels largely operate independently and have few incentives to cooperate at catchment scale. Several factors entrenched in Cambodian society have held back cooperation among stakeholders across social and governance levels, including cultural traits, lack of trust, overlapping mandates, centralisation, capacity

issues, and lack of information on land demarcation, land tenure and hydrology. Donor funded projects seem to have bridged the relationships between LDs in planning and implementation, but only temporarily i.e. depending on the availability of funding.

Cultural traits

The interactions of Cambodian stakeholders are still largely influenced by cultural factors such as strong and exclusive kinships, a sense of fear, lack of assertiveness, and deeply entrenched patronage structures. First, interactions between Cambodian peasants remain largely defined by kinship relations. Farmers are reluctant to interact with groups outside their own boundaries, except in times of necessity, and even though social reciprocity through gift giving to build trust is evident, this practice has little influence on bridging the gap between farmers across schemes. Second, there is a strong tendency for people to rely on government authorities to direct them on how they should interact with groups other than their own kin, a feeling that derives from fear of being challenged by the government for acting without the approval of higher authorities. Third, patronage structures exist within departments, particularly in relation to the delivery of services such as lack of consequences for unapproved absence at work, lack of rule enforcement for underperformance and the practice of money collection (rent-seeking) by officials.

Trust

General lack of trust is another problem in Cambodian society that inhibits cooperation between stakeholders. Lack of trust exists among groups of farmers across schemes and governance bodies at various levels for various reasons. First, distrust between neighbouring Farmer Water User Communities (FWUCs) is caused by a lack of a sense of unification and collective identity across schemes. Second, lack of trust between FWUCs and CCs is due to lingering bad sentiments attached to past personal conflicts, misunderstandings arising from unclear/or overlapping mandates

4 Organic Law here refers to Law on Administrative Management of Capital, Provinces, Municipalities, Districts and Khans (2008).

regarding irrigation works, and the failure to ensure transparency in financial management. Third, lack of trust between FWUCs and LDs is largely due to the unpredictability of service delivery from LDs, rent-seeking practices, and misunderstanding deriving from the imposition of contemporary laws on farmers unprepared for such changes.

Mandates

The mandates defining the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders as set out in government laws and policies are flawed, containing overlaps and gaps (e.g. between the mandates of FWUCs and CCs or between LDs) and have consequently led to duplicated and inefficient service delivery.

Centralisation

LDs were formed as separate bodies and thus tend to conduct planning and implementation independently. Each LD focuses on fulfilling the mandate of their parent ministry, demonstrating a strong line of centralisation.

Capacity issues

Capacity in terms of financial resources, technical and managerial skills is one of the key challenges hindering the cooperation of stakeholders across governance levels. Lacking financial resources, leadership capacity and the authority to mobilise farmers, FWUCs have to rely on support from CCs who have the ability to mobilise farmers and have broad networks among district authorities through which they can access support from top government authorities and negotiate with neighbouring FWUCs. Nonetheless, due to limited commune/sangkat funds CCs cannot provide financial support to FWUCs for the regular maintenance of irrigation infrastructure, leaving both bodies dependent on financial support from NGOs, political parties and generous benefactors. Poor organisational capacity, including issues such as understaffing, low pay, lack of operational support, poor technical capacity of staff, absence of job descriptions, and scarce financial resources, prevents LDs from interacting with each other and with farmers on a regular basis.

Lack of information

Stakeholders lack essential information about land demarcation, land tenure and hydrology, which is necessary for ensuring integrated catchment management and cooperation among stakeholders.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

What do these findings suggest for the promotion of ICM in Cambodia? Based on the results of this research, there is a gap between the ideal principles of ICM and the actual practice in Cambodia. How can this gap be made smaller? Key suggestions are:

- 1. Necessary considerations for the establishment of RBCs need to be put in place**
 - a. If RBCs are to be established, they need to be integrated into the existing governance system determined by commune law⁵, the Organic Law, and other sectoral laws⁶, in a way that avoids duplicated roles and overlapping mandates which could potentially create conflict and tension between governance bodies.
 - b. Water within a catchment cuts across many local territories and thus concerns a range of different users or FWUCs and government stakeholders. RBCs should be inclusive of all stakeholders, including local users or FWUCs whose livelihoods are directly dependent on the land and water resources being managed. Sectoral reform policies directing the establishment of RBCs should respect the contribution of local farmers in decision making processes.
- 2. Addressing local scale issues that inhibit the development of cross-boundary relationships is essential**
 - a. The findings of this study show that the interpersonal relationships of Cambodian farmers are still determined by cultural factors such as kinship or trust. Also, interactions require transaction costs, which are costly

5 Commune Law here refers to the Law on Commune/Sangkat Administration and Management (2001).

6 Other sectoral laws entail the Water Law 2007 of MoWRAM, the Fishery Law 2006 of MAFF, the Land Law 2001 of MoLMUPC, etc.

to local farmers. There is a need for external support to promote collective identity in terms of awareness raising, network expansion across schemes and provision of financial, administrative and technical resources.

- b. Improving cooperation between FWUCs to ensure water sharing across schemes should start with the simple solutions suggested by farmer groups. To this end, we found that farmers’ principal demand is the sharing of irrigation scheme maintenance costs between upstream and downstream water users.
- c. There is a need to build the organisational capacity of FWUCs. One strategy is to strengthen their relationship with CCs, which could be achieved through the provision of clear guidance on how the two bodies should share their ideas and carry out joint decision-making. Mechanisms to ensure transparency in the management of irrigation service fees (ISFs) by FWUCs and the extent to which FWUCs can generate their own revenue within a commune’s jurisdiction need to be renegotiated among relevant stakeholders.

3. Addressing higher scale issues that inhibit the development of cooperation is also essential

- a. The case study highlights the need for reconsidering the relationships between CCs and LDs, and between LDs and farmers or FWUCs, through improving trust, re-defining roles and responsibilities, enhancing service delivery and reducing the rent-seeking practices of officials. These levels of governance need to move towards better informed cooperation.
- b. ICM cannot be achieved without a reform process in place, especially the deconcentration reform

4. Other prerequisites for ICM should be considered

Promoting and improving the management of water at catchment level cannot be done in isolation, i.e. without also considering the management of land, environment, fisheries, and other resource sectors within the catchment, and to do that requires:

- Training the FWUCs and CCs on how to work together to plan for multiple and integrated uses of water;
- Sufficient information on hydrology, land tenure, and land demarcation (e.g. agricultural, fisheries, forestry, etc.);
- Better information for farmers on property rights;
- Action by the government to push for land registration in order to ensure good records of the land tenure of individual households as well as public land.

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