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A Rights-Based Approach to Development: A Cambodian Perspective

Ou Sivhuoch



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Ou Sivhuoch, research fellow (on leave), CDRI, and PhD candidate of Political Science (International Development Studies) at the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada

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CDRI

📍 56, Street 315, Tuol Kork, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

✉ PO Box 622, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

☎ (855-23) 881384/881701/881916/883603

📠 (855-23) 880734

E-mail: cdri@cdri.org.kh

Website: www.cdri.org.kh

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Acronyms

CEDAC	Centre d'Etude et de Developpement Agricole Cambodgien (Cambodian Centre for Study and Development in Agriculture)
LWD	Life with Dignity
MFIs	Microfinance Institutions
NGOs	Non-government organisations
RBA	Rights-Based Approach
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Fund

Abstract¹

The rights-based approach (RBA) to development emerged as a new and relatively authoritative paradigm, starting from the late 1990s. At its core is the argument that human rights and development converge and, unless the socio-economic rights of the poor are attained, poverty cannot be alleviated. Its approach is to shift NGOs' strategy from providing charity to empowering the poor politically so that they are able to claim their rights. Recently, major bilateral and multilateral donors and international non-government organisations have been gradually adopting the approach. Significant resources are channelled to support RBA. The influential trend has swept the Global South widely, including Cambodia; several donor agencies and international NGOs in the country have increasingly implemented RBA. Thus far, there is thin literature documenting the potentials and pitfalls of the approach, specifically for NGOs in Cambodia. This paper, using the concept of power, provides feasible suggestions for the adoption of RBA. It takes seriously that power is entrenched in Cambodian administrative, social and international donor structures. Therefore, for a long-term perspective, an adjusted version of RBA is advocated. It needs to consider seriously deep-rooted power, adopting a gradual rather than a radical approach of attempting hastily to remove power from the state and give it to the poor. The paper then challenges a stream of RBA debates pressing local NGOs and their donors rapidly to adopt purely politicised projects and abandon conventional service provision. Local NGOs and their donors should not disregard service delivery swiftly but integrate rights into services. The analysis is based upon consultation with a wide range of comparative literature and interviews conducted between 2009 and 2013.

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1. Introduction

The rights-based approach to development has been widely adopted by bilateral and multilateral development assistance agencies and international non-government organisations (NGOs) (Ako, Anyidoho and Crawford 2013; Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter 2012; Nyamu-Musembi and Cornwall 2004). Central to RBA is the idea that human rights and development are intertwined and, unless human rights are addressed and promoted, poverty reduction and overall development objectives will be unattainable (Ako, Anyidoho and Crawford 2013; Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter 2012). A discursive approach dominates those agencies' websites and policy papers; likewise, various development consultants and advisers are mainstreaming the conception through workshops, reports and evaluations, indicating that RBA will proliferate and expand in the years to come (Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter 2012). When the rise of the RBA paradigm has reached its peak globally, it will very likely affect the structure, resources and working styles of NGOs, the primary implementers of RBA. Hence it requires that NGOs in both the North and the South adjust themselves to the trend; if they do not, they may encounter funding cuts (Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter 2012).

Cambodia is characterised as a heavily aid-dependent country. Approximately Cambodia's budget is constituted by 40 percent of foreign development assistance, of which close to 14 percent is spent by NGOs (CDC 2014; RGC 2013). As NGOs in the country rely largely on external support (CCC 2013; Khieng 2013; Ou and Kim 2013; Ou and Kim 2014), understanding the global development phenomenon is crucial for the sector, which has to modify its agenda to conform to the emerging development policy shift. It is critically important that, while RBA is broadly endorsed by the major development agencies, it remains controversial to argue that the paradigm will be appropriate for the global South and produce expected positive outcomes (Cornwall and Nyamu-Mesembi 2005; Uvin 2007); thus far mixed initial outcomes (including harmful ones) have unfolded (Hickey and Mitlin 2009). In Cambodia, a rough review of a range of websites of NGOs and donor agencies shows that a few of them have already implemented the approach; however, academic studies on their strengths and weaknesses are scant. Hence, this paper will critically examine the RBA concept in relation to the local context and propose a conceptually adjusted version of RBA that fits local circumstances, which would be useful for local NGOs in particular and current RBA debates in general.

The paper first briefly introduces the methodology. Second, it reviews the main debates on RBA. Third, it outlines the paper's framework. Fourth, it discusses three sets of Cambodian experiences to reflect on the chosen RBA framework. The first set comprises numerous participatory development projects related to community-based natural resource management (studies on common pool resources such as fish, forests and mangrove trees). The second set highlights community empowerment projects, particularly focusing on saving initiatives. The third set is the recent RBA experiences of one particular local NGO, Life with Dignity (LWD), and a few others. By projecting the local experiences and context against the central arguments in the RBA literature and framework, the paper will set out a new conceptual domain, specifically for development actors in Cambodia. Lastly, a short conclusion wraps up the key arguments.

2. Methodology

The paper features a literature review on RBA. It primarily uses an extensive mapping exercise to track the history of RBA and interrogate key arguments for and against it. In addition, the author's previous work and observations are used to inform the study so as to point critically to elements of RBA that are and are not appropriate in Cambodia. It uses field data from approximately 70 of the author's interviews and discussions with local and foreign NGO staff, commune councillors, district, provincial and national officials, community representatives and members, donor organisation representatives, academics and local people, which were conducted between 2009 and 2013 in Phnom Penh, Battambang, Kampot, Kompong Speu and Takeo. Those interviews directly and indirectly support the paper's arguments; hence some are quoted, others used in the background. The author also participated in a workshop organised by a large rural development NGO, CEDAC (Cambodian Centre for Study and Development in Agriculture), on 8 April 2013, in which he witnessed hundreds of members of 300 savings groups from around the country learning from each other, discussing their saving strategies and building networks.

3. Emergence, core arguments, potential and pitfalls

RBA has gained popularity for at least a decade and a half; nevertheless, scholars remain divided about its hopes and challenges. This section provides a brief historical evolution, followed by key arguments for and against the approach. It formulates the frame for the paper.

The genealogy and core pillars of RBA

Peter Uvin (2007) traced the genealogy of RBA and found that, in the early 1970s, an early version of RBA was the right to development, in which Third World countries used their majority at the United Nations to negotiate for the redistribution of international resources to better favour poor countries. In the mid-1980s the concept was visible in different documents of the World Bank and United Nations; however, it had not been put into practice until recently. From the mid-1990s, the concepts of human rights and development, which had been distinct from each other, merged. Internationally recognised human rights became intertwined with poverty reduction (Darrow and Tomas 2005; Nelson 2003; Uvin 2004).

According to Uvin (2007), several reasons underpin the amalgamation. One is the end of the Cold War, which opened the way for development zeal. A second was the failure of structural adjustment programmes, which was viewed as stemming from insufficient governmental accountability. The third was a trend to redefine development as more than economic growth to include fundamental rights.

Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter (2012) documented the various conferences and initiatives organised by the United Nations that were crucial in disseminating, legitimating and expanding RBA. An important milestone was the 1993 UN World Convention on Human Rights in Vienna, which reached the view that all forms of human rights were of equivalent importance, and the following 1997 UN reform agenda, which concluded "that security, human rights and development were interrelated processes, and that human rights should be mainstreamed throughout all UN agencies" (Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter 2012: 478). Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter (2012) further recalled that the early champions of RBA included the United

Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF); the United Nations Development Program and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. International NGOs such as Oxfam and CARE started to adopt the approach from the early 2000s, and two bilateral agencies—the United Kingdom's Department for International Development and the Swedish International Development Agency—followed. By the mid-2000s, RBA had swept the entire UN system, and influential NGOs such as Save the Children and Action Aid, together with major European bilateral donors Denmark, Norway, Switzerland, Finland, and Germany, declared their commitment to RBA. In 2006, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the World Bank participated (Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter 2012). By 2013, the World Bank found that most bilateral and multilateral aid agencies had designed their aid policies based on RBA, explicitly and implicitly, except only newly emerging donors (World Bank 2013). Interestingly, not only secular NGOs committed themselves to RBA; several prominent Christian-based NGOs followed suit, including Catholic Relief Services, Christian Aid, the Church of Sweden and Dan-Church Aid (Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter 2012). The significance of RBA is seen in budget terms as well. For instance, in 2007, the UK committed USD9.8 billion, Sweden USD4.4 billion and Norway USD0.37 billion to RBA (Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter 2012).

What makes RBA so attractive? Within the convergence of rights and development frameworks under RBA, it is argued that poverty is the violation of individuals' rights; therefore RBA attempts to enhance the capacity of the poor to claim socio-economic rights, which are considered integral to achieving poverty reduction and overall development (Ako, Anyidoho and Crawford 2013: 48; Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter 2012; Miller, Vene Klasen and Clark 2005). Framed differently, the key to reducing poverty is the promotion of poor people's rights; once socio-economic rights are in place, poverty fades away. Likewise, it is maintained that injecting rights into development will tackle the root structural causes of poverty and exclusion, narrowing inequality and enhancing accountability of both the state and donors (Ako, Anyidoho and Crawford 2013; Darrow and Tomas 2005; Hamm 2001; Hickey and Mitlin 2009; Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter 2012; Miller, Vene Klasen and Clark 2005). Underpinning the above equation, the approach emphasises the significance of local political processes such as grass-roots collective mobilisation, participation and advocacy and also the outcomes of such actions (Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter 2012; Monkman, Miles and Easton 2007: 453-454; Uvin 2007). It is stressed that participation constitutes a transformative process to development and that RBA represents repoliticising participation involving the processes and outcomes above. RBA marks the movement toward a new form of development as entitlement, shifting away from charity (Gready 2008: 842). The trend coincides with the complaints that NGOs over the past two decades have contributed more in service delivery but not much in empowerment to the poor (Banks and Hulme 2012). From that rights-based perspective, NGOs are required to train and empower the poor to claim those rights (Ako, Anyidoho and Crawford 2013).

What is wrong with RBA?

While the approach appears fashionable, sceptics fear that RBA is nothing more than a fad (Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter 2012; Nyamu-Musembi and Cornwall 2004; Uvin 2007). They have posed some fundamental questions.

First, while claiming rights centres more on the relationships between citizens and the government, it requires additional changes of power. That involves the difficulty of overcoming

deeply entrenched power structures (particularly between international NGOs and donors, and recipient governments and donors), which potentially inhibit the path to securing rights (Ako, Anyidoho and Crawford 2013). On the aid-giving side, the current accountability system between bilateral donors and their taxpayers and between donors and the recipient countries is hard to change and is likely to remain entrenched (Cornwall and Nyamu-Mesembi 2005). Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter (2012: 496) are concerned that “There will be little upstream accountability in practice, however, as the upper-tier NGOs and donors still hold most of the resources”. From there, they developed a hypothesis that RBA, despite its one and a half decades in operation, has been struggling to express its value and thus might be resisted by implementing international and local NGOs, and as a result donors would throw the ideas into the dustbin along with other forgotten development strategies (p. 497). More importantly, given the structural interests that define global economic inequality, achieving rights to development is difficult. This difficulty is reflected in the history that the developed countries showed little intention to change for the sake of the economic betterment of developing countries (Cornwall and Nyamu-Mesembi 2005).

Second, for some, RBA does not represent a revolutionary shift because rights-based elements were already well established in various concepts of development, albeit not called “rights” (Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter 2012; Uvin 2007). The notions of participation, empowerment and inclusivity had been a discursive mainstay in development for a long time; therefore, RBA represents “‘old development’ wine served up in new, rights-based bottles” (Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter 2012: 479). Implicit here and elaborated below is that RBA, like other progressive development concepts, is easier said than done.

Third, translating RBA rhetoric into practice is a demanding task. As the debates go on, it is difficult to arrive to a point that RBA is working (Hickey and Mitlin 2009). The approach could be too confrontational for vulnerable groups and hence may damage the path for negotiation with the government (Hickey and Mitlin 2009: 212), especially in weak states (Moore 2001). Given all these pitfalls, scholars critical of RBA are not convinced that the new paradigm is able to deliver its promises.

Despite the contradictions and critiques, RBA is likely to remain an authoritative paradigm in years to come mainly because of donors’ control of development resources and support of the approach (Ako, Anyidoho and Crawford 2013; Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter 2012; World Bank 2013), underpinned by the breakdown of political and development ideology that separated the West and the East after the Cold War, civil from political rights and economic from social rights (Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter 2012). Even Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter (2012), who are quite pessimistic about the outcome of RBA, share the view of others on that development trend.

4. In search of a RBA that works

Given the pervasive paradigm shift, NGOs, as development practitioners, are left with few or no options but to observe, learn and adopt the approach. The paper therefore examines what is in RBA that is best for NGOs. In a recent comprehensive edited volume, Sam Hickey and Diana Mitlin drew a balanced conclusion that “Both the promise and pitfalls of rights-based approaches are substantial and very real” (Hickey and Mitlin 2009: 255). They added that after the promotion and implementation of RBA over more than a decade, “patterns are

emerging, some positive and some harmful” (Hickey and Mitlin 2009: 210). Typical positive instances include the approach’s assistance in realising citizenship for women, the landless and indigenous groups in Cameroon and Latin America (Hickey and Mitlin 2009) and in providing analytical tools for UNICEF to seek the origins of human rights abuses and then address them (Munro 2009). On the damaging side, there is already evidence that the confrontational ways of RBA are too blunt to be useful (Patel and Mitlin 2009). It is instead advocated that local groups and politicians should limit their relationships to a level that does not create extreme hostility from the government so that both sides could still engage with each other and development aspirations such rights could emerge (Ibid). In the same manner, Gledhill (2009) advises against RBA movements that romanticise or exaggerate the civicness of groups living in extreme inequality and deprivation; any encouragement of these people to use violence to settle disputes and claim their entitlements would dislocate them from normal and everyday life.

Taking the middle ground, Ball (2005) asked if there is evidence of complementarity between human rights and development. His response was positive, bringing in an example of Action Aid, which had incorporated empowerment into conventional service delivery. There are also suggestions for working with, not against, the government, empowering it to understand its responsibilities; the partnerships, however, are accompanied by advocacy, lobbying and critiques (Ball 2005: 280). Likewise, Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter (2012) observed two opposing trends in RBA. RBA purists advocate NGOs’ complete abandonment of service provision, leaving the task to the government but holding it accountable. In short, the job of NGOs and communities is to watch the government’s performance. In contrast, RBA pragmatics sees service delivery as a crucial and effective means for community participation and empowerment. Kindornay, Ron and Carpenter (2012) maintain that the synthesised approach (in which NGOs combine more advocacy into their service delivery) would be more practical and feasible than the approach articulated by the purists.

Combining RBA and service delivery is the area the article attempts to articulate. The above discussions indicate that there is not much to expect from donors in pressing recipient governments to release power to their citizens. Hence the government will be pretty much the same in overuse and abuse of power. Therefore, instead of following neatly the RBA purists’ extreme approach, NGOs may find collaborating with and simultaneously advocating or claiming rights from the recipient or local government an appropriate and politically feasible option. It also takes into account the context of weak states: forcing them to be duty bearers overnight could be a daunting or impossible task.

In summary, despite challenges, RBA remains attractive. Hence, NGOs in recipient countries like Cambodia have to adjust to the trend, making the most of it rather than going against the tide. One solution is for them to adopt a middle way, inserting rights into service delivery.

Power and empowerment

The discussions above explicitly and implicitly specify power as the key variable to be tackled: giving power to the poor by reducing the power of the state and, in some contexts, of the rich. It will be argued below that power is pervasive and structural. RBA is “inherently political, and takes power, struggle, and the vision of a better society as key factors in development”, and development cannot be regarded as technical problems that can be addressed or resolved outside of politics, without conflict (Chapman et al. 2009: 166-167). It is argued in the following

pages that “Rights cannot be truly realized without changes in the structures and relationships of power in all their forms: changes in who make decisions, in whose voice is heard, in what topics are seen as legitimate, in people’s sense of relative worth, and in the confidence people have to speak out” (Chapman et al. 2009: 166-167). While the process is inevitably political, bringing politics to the forefront seems extreme and hard to achieve. This section argues that, for the poor to obtain power from the powerful, a starting point is needed; economic power seems to be a prerequisite for political power.

Empowerment is another core element in rights enhancement (Gready 2008; Heinsohn 2004; Miller, Vene Klasen and Clark 2005). Power is operationalised in visible and hidden forms (Miller, Vene Klasen and Clark 2005). The visible dimension refers to legislatures, laws and various policies which may provide privilege to certain groups and undermine others. The hidden one often operates undetected. For instance, some poor and weak groups might not articulate their discontent towards either the rich or politicians for fear of the consequences. Another form of hidden power is reflected in ways that political elites mobilise resources from the national budget through patronage networks and redistribute them informally as gifts to the poor in return for votes. Some segments of the poor, believing that elites are doing the right things, do not question the informal redistribution process. Religious belief is a form of power as well; for instance, a poor person could self-acknowledge as unfortunate because of accumulated karma (bad actions) in a previous life, not because of any political or economic structure. Empowerment and rights to development attempt to raise the understanding of the poor and marginalised about power dynamics, build their capacity and challenge unequal power relations (Miller, Vene Klasen and Clark 2005). For Srilatha Batliwala, an influential Indian scholar and rights activist:

The term empowerment refers to a range of activities from individual self-assertion to collective resistance, protest and mobilization that *challenge basic power relations*. For individuals and groups where class, caste, ethnicity and gender determine their access to resources and power, their empowerment begins when they not only recognize the systemic forces that oppress them, but act to change existing power relationships. Empowerment, therefore, is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systemic forces that marginalize women and other disadvantaged sectors in a given context (quoted in Miller, Vene Klasen and Clark 2005: 34, italicization mine).

Miller, Vene Klasen and Clark (2005) see empowerment not as a gift to be offered to people, but as requiring their engagement as part of the larger society, taking action. Specifically, empowerment means that people develop self-worth and a compassionate world view, skills and the intention to act alone or collectively to change the world. This type of empowerment is what Moore (2001) called political dimension empowerment. Moore added that collective empowerment matters and is influential, which is why the donor community often advocates community empowerment. Further, for Moore, empowerment needs another complementary material element; “the core underlying proposition is that improving the material status of poor people is empowering because it will weaken interlocking constraints of social, economic and political dependence and provide poor people with greater freedom and autonomy, personal and political” (Moore 2001: 324). While Moore emphasises the material dimension less than the political, raising the poor’s socio-economic status leads to the desired outcome of RBA.

In summary, power is multidimensional, and the poor’s struggle for power could be a conflictive and painful process. Empowerment itself is two-sided, involving economic advancement and political progress.

In what ways are these concepts reflected in Cambodian experience? That is the topic of the next section.

5. Existing experiences as lessons for RBA adoption

This section will illustrate through comparative analyses of fishery and forestry communities and saving groups that the state's central power structure is deeply rooted, and, for the fisheries, social forces such as the rich and well-connected concessionaire are dominant. There is not much the donor community has done to break that dominance; rather, the environment for empowerment appears to have shrunk over time (Marschke 2012; Marschke, Lykhim and Kim 2014; Ou 2013; Sok 2014). Here two broad natural resource communities are analysed. The first such groups were originally established by various NGOs such as CEDAC, not to achieve the objectives of RBA, but with expected outcomes sharing those objectives. This is reflected in the author's interviews with CEDAC's president and executive director and the leaders of CEDAC-supported forestry groups, and on CEDAC's website. Other natural resource groups, such as those created by LWD, explicitly emerge to express concerns of RBA. Savings groups are intended primarily to achieve poverty reduction, not to attain rights per se; however, from a long-term perspective, they could share the RBA vision, as explained below. Those groups are analysed to provide understanding about the context in which donors and NGOs plant RBA. Those cases will echo the existing critics of RBA, who have expressed pessimism about RBA's ability to produce the expected outcomes. However, instead of agreeing with those critics, the paper will illustrate that in circumstances where overcoming the state's power is difficult, a middle ground for RBA could be considered. LWD's evidence of RBA endorses the new conceptualisation, indicating that service delivery should remain a mainstay and rights should be integrated rather than pursued alone. It also demonstrates that economic empowerment fulfils the RBA objectives and could be a venue for political struggle pressing the government to adopt a rights vision.

This section briefly introduces where power rests in Cambodian public administration, followed by brief accounts of three cases and comprehensive discussions, comparing and contrasting what has happened in those fields as documented by various existing studies and the author's own fieldwork.

Power structures in Cambodian public administration

Cambodia embarked on decentralisation in 2002. Three communal elections have been held to date. One commune council mandate is to coordinate and collaborate with NGOs on grass-roots development work. Another tier of reform, deconcentration, designed to devolve power to sub-national governments, started in 2009. The idea of deconcentration is to have better coordination between province and district bodies, which then assist the commune to respond to popular demands.

Although studies over the last decade have documented that commune councils have improved significantly in responsiveness, accountability and local democracy, in general the decentralisation and deconcentration reform faces challenges to deliver the profound changes envisioned. With decentralisation, it is often argued that there is little willingness from the central government to release further power to strengthen communes or local government; rather the reform allows the ruling party to control and consolidate its power in rural areas

(Hughes 2009). For commune councils to be responsive, they need more than a fixed package of funds from the central government. In fact, the decentralisation law passed in 2001 allows them to generate certain tax and non-tax revenues including land taxes, immovable property taxes and rental taxes; however, so far these have not happened. A related point is that local councils are not provided the authority to manage natural resources such as fish and forests; they can only report illegal fishing or logging to district and provincial offices; if the higher tiers do not respond, there is little the commune can do. Thus far, deconcentration has progressed slowly, and hence there has not been much help and improvement from district and provincial administrations to communes.

This is highly relevant to NGOs operating in these tiers because the lack of support from the state constrains NGOs' empowerment work, as pointed out below.

Forestry and fishery communities

According to Cambodian forestry laws and regulations passed in the early 2000s, forests are both state and public property. Hence the forestry administration has the authority to offer rights to manage and extract the resources based on rules and regulations (Kim and Öjendal 2011). Therefore, community forestry entities are recognised whose objective is “to allow villages located in and around forests to participate in forest management and establish a form of partnership or agreement with the government” (McKenney et al. 2004: 48). The regulation provides that forest resources need to be well protected and managed with participation from citizens, community, NGOs and the authorities. The government has been supportive in establishing fishery communities as well. In 2001, 56 percent of concessional fishing lots (more than 500,000 hectares of water) were given to local communities to manage, exploit and conserve. In 2012, all the remaining lake and stream lots were nullified, and more communities have been established (Sok 2013a). However, according to Kim and Öjendal (2011), while such communities require formal state links, the communities they examined were established with support from international NGOs and barely received the expected support from the Fisheries Department. That happens to community forestry as well (Kim and Öjendal 2011). The natural groups examined here, whether created to achieve RBA objectives or not, share similar empowerment goals to RBA. It is participation, for instance, that empowers people in owning and protecting their common pool resources, and sooner or later the communities can reap the benefits from those resources and reduce poverty.

Savings groups

In a study comparing microfinance in Cambodia and Timor-Leste, Susanne Allden (2009) argued that microfinance in Cambodia had advanced much further than in Timor-Leste. Part of the reason is that the Cambodian government has been more constructive and supportive in this area. One key aspect is regulation of the sector: “[T]he Cambodian success is, in part, explained by its effective adoption of regulations for micro-finance, providing an institutional framework for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and emerging MFIs [microfinance institutions]” (Allden 2009: 273). While the savings groups under examination do not share all the aspects of microfinance, the state's support to NGOs in particular means there is little or no hindrance to the operations of either savings groups or microfinance. Microfinance involves MFIs giving loans to farmers, who have to return the loans with interest. Savings groups follow more the ideas of what Putnam (1993) calls credit rotation associations, in which people do not borrow money from outside but pool their contributions on a regular basis; each member in

turn takes the whole share and is obliged to continue to pay money until everybody gets their portion. Savings groups in rural Cambodia often take the form that NGOs offer initial capital and encourage the poor to set up groups and pool their own money. The NGOs usually do not ask for the return of seed capital. Other cases are slightly different, NGOs not providing capital at all but only explaining and encouraging people to save their own money collectively. While this is similar to Putnam's credit rotation associations, it varies in that group members gain from minimal monthly interest—2 percent for the cases the author visited. Members who do not need money could wait and gain interests; however, if they do, they could borrow from their own saving groups but have to pay interest of 3 percent. The whole idea is to encourage members to save collectively and to gain some interests and if they borrow from their own groups' budget they only pay 1 percent of interest because they gain 2 percent at the same time. If they keep their money at home, they usually spend most of it and have little or nothing left each month or year and interests are not gained either². Non-members can borrow the money left over from the members but with a higher interest rate of around 10 percent, which is still lower than that charged by informal moneylenders.

A soft approach that works

LWD is the first local NGO, transformed from a faith-based international NGO called Lutheran World Foundation, to have incorporated RBA in 2003 (Viriyā 2009). LWD operates in six very poor districts in Battambang, Pursat, Kompong Chhnang and Kompong Speu. In an interview, a senior staff member of the organisation explained that the NGO's approach is to empower both the citizens and state through programmes emphasising livelihood and rights improvement. LWD's website states its position of RBA pragmatics, suggesting the NGO works with both the weak and the powerful:

RBA “primarily involves building up rights awareness on all levels, both among *the powerless* and *the powerful*. Development objectives are also human rights objectives. An emphasis on human rights in the development context helps focus attention on structural inequities that cause and maintain poverty and exclusion” (italicization mine).

The author's visit to Kompong Speu's Oral district and his interviews with an LWD field staff member, the chief and deputy chiefs of the district and three commune councillors indicate there was a general sense of appreciation from the district and local authorities because the NGO was the first one to support the district, providing much needed material support (such as school buildings, roads and health centres) and capacity building (including rights education) to both the poor and local officials. The interviews revealed that, because the NGO has been providing services and constantly positively engaged with the authorities, the relationship has been broadly harmonious, and its rights advocacy, which was pursued progressively rather than radically, was gradually accepted, despite some reluctance from the officials at times. The senior staff reported that some NGOs have criticised LWD for moving closer to the government; however, he said the position of the NGO was to engage and advocate from within – a fair position that also works in other places where the state, as in Vietnam, provides little space for civil society engagement (Wells-Dang 2014). Another recent study observing the government's position toward local NGOs and communities in Cambodia supports LWD in adopting embedded advocacy—engaging yet advocating simultaneously with the government—because the government has recently been more restrictive on NGO work that empowers and promotes local democracy (Ou 2013). Ou also notes that some local NGOs and

² Based on the interviews with various saving groups' representatives across the provinces visited.

their counterpart communities have already perceived the government's political message and have started to embed advocacy into their normal development projects. One local community representative said:

Recently, the authorities have restricted the space for advocacy and empowerment activities; however, we do not stop here, but we have managed to play the game. Our method is we insert advocacy and rights elements into rural livelihood projects such as income generation activities. (Interview, 6 October 2011)

Discussion

Various NGO and donor projects have been designed to mobilise the poor to form groups to engage in saving activities and protection of their common fish and forests, as part of the empowerment process. The development of these groups differs. Natural resources communities often struggle to sustain themselves, while the savings groups are more active, at least over the past few years.

At the beginning of a community, there is little participation in saving activities; however, there is often more in the cases of fishery and forestry communities (Kim and Öjendal 2011). The author's interviews with several savings group leaders in Takeo demonstrate that it was often difficult for NGOs to ignite people's interest and convince them to put together the money, which used to be kept at home, and manage it collectively. Several savings group leaders, speaking at the CEDAC workshop, recalled that at the beginning, only three or four members participated, and they saved from USD0.25 a month in the late 1990s. As the groups developed quite healthily, more people joined and the membership expanded. These days, some members of savings groups told the author that their membership grew approximately to a hundred or even more and their budget to several thousand dollars, which had never happened in the history of rural Cambodia. That is not to say that savings groups always perform well; obviously there are numerous failed cases (Jørgensen 2009; Marschke, Lykhim and Kim 2014). In the workshop organised by CEDAC, it was stated that out of some 5000 savings groups it had supported from 1997 to 2013, roughly 60 percent performed well and the rest had either dissolved or stagnated. The point here is that, compared with savings groups, forestry and fishery groups have largely failed (Kim and Öjendal 2011; Sok 2013a). Kim and Öjendal (2011) noted that, at the birth of fishing and forestry communities, there was often high enthusiasm among the members, but it often faded over time. People are initially excited primarily because they consider those common resources important for their community and the next generation (Kim and Öjendal 2011; Sok 2013b); however, the weak performance of groups discourages participation. Kim and Öjendal (2011) explained that poor performance meant the members did not get positive responses from their community and leaders, commune councils or district and provincial departments of fisheries and forestry. When they reported crimes occurring in their community, the authorities were unwilling or unable to take effective action (Kim and Öjendal 2011). In short, members are generally not empowered for the natural resource groups most of which barely function.

Three causes could explain why it proves very challenging for resources groups. The first is that the state does not devolve sufficient authority to the local tiers, as discussed above (Hughes 2009; Kim and Öjendal 2011; Marschke 2012; Marschke, Lykhim and Kim 2014). Without sufficient funds (especially salaries) and power, the provincial, district and commune tiers at times collude with perpetrators for survival (Sok 2013a). Second, a study by Say Sok (2014) found that natural resource groups' performance has been damaged by strong social forces

such as rich and powerful perpetrators who bribe or threaten the weak sub-national authorities. Likewise Marschke (2012) and Marschke, Lykhim and Kim (2014) found in coastal areas of Koh Kong that local groups established to protect small patches of mangroves and other fishery resources could function effectively but have been similarly retarded by dominant sand mining companies (whose dredging causes fishery decline); even local authorities cannot stand in their way. Third is donors' limited support and poor local community livelihoods. The poor are aware that common resources are important but some political economy issues are beyond their local authorities' capacities. Therefore, they need intervention from upper layers such as donors (Marschke, Lykhim and Kim 2014). However, when they need such support against abuses of the mining industry, for instance, they are often disappointed: "[O]ften, outsiders come in and tell us what to do. We often listen, since they sometimes know more than us, but it is hard when we ask for support on issues that we cannot solve, and they say that they cannot help us" (Marschke, Lykhim and Kim 2014: 2449). At the same time, people living in protected areas need to generate income as well:

"When we list the things we most need help with, they [donor representatives] say they understand, but that they also have to answer to higher people and that only certain types of projects will get funded. Since we live in a protected area, it is always environmental projects, but we have found these do not always help us to earn money, and we do need to survive." (Marschke, Lykhim and Kim 2014: 2449)

According to Marschke and her colleagues, the dilemma speaks to the difficulties of the local people in balancing between making a living from their natural resources and protecting them. That also explains the challenges of people settling in the locations where LWD operates. When it comes to income-generating activities, it is easier to mobilise people; getting poor people together to protect their resources is challenging.

For savings groups, the story is different. The state supports such activities, an activity that Moore (2001) calls cheap talk, because the activities do not threaten politicians. The activities fit with local interests once begun; people generate profits out of their collective saving. Such work does not challenge any powerful group; hence there are few barriers to its progress. But as is indicated below, energetic saving groups that become empowered economically could become powerful political networks in the long run.

Different studies document how saving groups empower people, the most tangible form of empowerment being women's improved social status, power, livelihood, skills and social capital (Hiwasa 2014; Jørgensen 2009). A woman is quoted:

When I join the group, I can learn from other women... when I join a meeting of the group, we get to know each other and improve cooperation. It's better than before. Before, I only stayed at home and knew people around the house... when I became a member of the women's group, we could save money, exchange experiences with others, and help each other. (Hiwasa 2014: 140-141)

Interestingly, Hiwasa claims improvement occurs among men too. Men have also changed their behaviour toward women; she quotes a husband acknowledging: "Before, women didn't have rights. But now, women have equal rights" (Hiwasa 2014: 142). Jørgensen (2009) found a similar trend in the villages she studied. Further, she posited that saving activities have contributed to improving bridging social capital in the village. Before the savings group, her informants said, they did not dare to communicate with some villagers having higher status; however, later the engagement in the savings group increased their confidence, better

connecting them to most of the villagers. Another point Hiwasa raised is the emergence of women's groups challenges the idea that in Cambodia, traditionally, there is an empty space or no intermediary institution connecting the state and society, which was argued by Ebihara more than four decades ago (1968). She wrote, "This chapter presents women's groups as 'artificial' seeds of CBOs that not only advance women's participation in the public and generate local civil society but also provide stepping stones to national engagement" (Hiwasa 2014: 149). Importantly, while saving groups are non-political and hence do not pose tangible demands on authorities for accountability, Feuer (2014) claims that well-performing groups already have indirect influence, Lukes' (1974) power to set the agenda:

At higher levels of organization, such as the national Farmers' Association, the collective agency of the rural community is increased relative to the government. While the Farmers' Association has maintained very amicable relationships with the government... the existence of large rural organizations is already an initial challenge to the monopoly of state authority in the countryside (Feuer 2014: 246).

The accounts by Feuer and others describe positive progress of popular empowerment in pressing for government's positive responses and accountability to the people. Interviews with LWD field staff and district and commune officials in Oral district point out that the authorities are much more open to human rights issues now than they were 15 years ago; they have worked more cooperatively with the NGO on rights issues and responded more to people's demands as they have better understood their roles and responsibilities. It is worth reiterating that for LWD, rights always go with rice: they provide tangible services and materials the government is supposed to provide and provide rights training to both the weak and authorities without generally damaging relationships with any individual or agency. Ou (2013) makes a case that if NGOs confront the government, their relationship turns sour and the desired outcome is often unachieved; in contrast, those embedding advocacy and rights in development work progress by keeping a working relationship with the government, and rights and advocacy objectives are achieved in one way or another.

The discussion above generates several important points. First, power within the state and some social and business groups is ingrained and negatively affects local economic interests and rights, and there is not much donors have done in assisting communities to change existing conditions. On the contrary, different studies show that, although Cambodia is aid dependent, over the last few years the environment for people's empowerment and democratic progress has been constrained (Merla 2010; Ou 2013; SPM 2006). Such a deep-seated structure of power leads to the following point. Second, lessons from the RBA of LWD and others are that rights empowerment is more easily pursued when it is embedded in service delivery. Third, while permissible saving activities appear apolitical at first glance, the economic empowerment and networks produced by such activities could gradually pose challenges to the government to change positively in the long run for the sake of the poor.

6. Conclusion

Over the last 15 years, RBA has entered the development industry lexicon, been mainstreamed into various donors' agendas and policies and is likely to expand and deepen in coming years. Central to the relevance of RBA to development is that unequal power relations constrict efforts to reduce poverty. Proponents are confident in removing structural barriers to the poor realising their dream of enhanced livelihoods and social and political status. However, critics argue that altering such deep-seated power is impossible and project that RBA will be discarded like other approaches.

Reflecting a Cambodian perspective, this study holds that the criticisms of RBA, while true to an extent, are overstated and that RBA could prove useful if adjusted to suit the local context. Further, given the donors' control of resources, there is not much development actors (especially NGOs) in the global South could do to buck the trend. Two elements of RBA should be conceptually fine-tuned. NGOs should increasingly integrate rights into normal development projects but not significantly or entirely transform service delivery into rights enhancing projects. This speaks to the literature and the donors adopting RBA to reconsider their strategies by not boldly forcing NGO partners to put rights at the forefront and risk failing to attain anything. While rights have to be claimed, they cannot be achieved overnight. NGOs have little say in influencing donors' agendas; however, donors should be flexible and NGOs creative in pursuing their rights objectives. Second, empowerment, a core component of RBA, should be lodged sequentially, economically first and politically later, especially where improvement is urgent or where it involves sectors in which communities established to protect resources are prone to failure. A long-term perspective is that economic empowerment is inherently political or that political empowerment can build on the success of the former. Pursuing political goals on a shallow foundation is not a practical *modus operandi*.

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