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# 20 YEARS' STRENGTHENING OF CAMBODIAN CIVIL SOCIETY: TIME FOR REFLECTION

OU Sivhuoch and KIM Sedara

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**CDRI Working Paper Series No. 85**

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*Responsibility for the ideas, facts and opinions presented in this research paper rests solely with the authors. Their opinions and interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views of the Cambodia Development Resource Institute.*

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## Acronyms

CAMPRO	Cambodian Professional Network
CBO	Community-based Organisation
CEDAC	Cambodian Centre for Study and Development in Agriculture
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
KCAD	Khmer Community for Agricultural Development
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
Sida	Swedish International Development Agency
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia

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## **Abstract**

In the 1980s and 1990s a large number of NGOs emerged, primarily in response to donor agendas on strengthening civil society to curb repressive developing country governments and support a broad democratisation process. Using Cambodia as a case in point, the paper indicates that over the last 20 years, donor money has been concentrated on funding a small group of NGOs, mostly located in the country's centre. While it is not argued that NGOs have no influence, they have not demonstrated basic civil society features. However, more recently and with support from some NGOs and donors, some local organisations, especially saving groups, have surfaced across the country, giving some optimism that, while the donors have built national level civil society only to a limited degree, they have gradually triggered forms of genuine grassroots civil society energy. Lessons from the past two decades are crucial to reflect on if civil society is to be improved in Cambodia.

**Key Words:** Cambodia, civil society (strengthening), NGO, UNTAC, neo-patrimonial state





## 1. Introduction

The year 2012 marks two decades since UNTAC's<sup>1</sup> intervention, from 1 March 1992 to 1 September 1993. Its mandate included “civil society strengthening” as part of the peace process, alongside the global agenda at the time.<sup>2</sup> UNTAC declared that “the strengthening of civil society is the most essential guarantee against the recurrence of the state repression of the past” (Hughes 2003: 138). Shortly afterwards, the donor community at large joined forces to support civil society in pursuing the UN's objectives. Envisioning a vibrant civil society, donors made available plentiful resources for the mushrooming of local non-government organisations (NGOs), whose expansion was described by Burnip (1997: 24-25) as “a short burst followed by an explosion”,<sup>3</sup> a phenomenon observed by Öjendal (2013) as “money chasing NGOs” at a time when there were few human resources available for NGOs. Hughes (2009) describes Cambodia as having one of the highest concentrations of NGOs. Have these international efforts translated into a strengthened Cambodian civil society over the last two decades?

## 2. The Conceptual Framework

To respond to our research question, it is critical that the study clarify the conception of civil society. The next task is to review the international development paradigm, donors' agendas and *modus operandi*, and the local (social, political and economic) contexts in which civil society has been supported. In this regard, we look at what civil society means and donors' performance and behaviour over the years in enhancing civil society, and then we assess the outcome.

After discussing the data, the article outlines the key characteristics of civil society. Other concepts that are often conflated with civil society—such as NGOs, hybrid civil society and CBOs—are brought up. Grassroots civil society organisations, associations, collective actions and movements—the old and new phenomena—will be brought to light as well. The next section is a critical review of the international agenda on civil society strengthening. The paper then discusses the Cambodian state and society on which donors' agendas have been imposed and the outcome of those attempts. Later, it delves into other possible explanations of the major causes of the rather bleak and mixed civil society outcome, followed by a brief conclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia was set up to implement the Agreement on the Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict, signed in Paris on 23 October 1991. The mandate included constitutional reforms, the creation of multiparty political competition, human rights, the organisation and conduct of elections, military arrangements, civil administration, maintenance of law and order, repatriation and resettlement of refugees and displaced persons, and rehabilitation of infrastructure.

<sup>2</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, development policy and aid transfers have been framed under a “New Policy Agenda” (Robinson 1994). The agenda called for NGOs to serve as central agents for exerting pressure on autocratic states, thus supporting democracy and good governance, providing welfare services to poor and vulnerable groups, and strengthening civil society.

<sup>3</sup> The sudden rise of NGOs was due to causes such as the favourable atmosphere created by UNTAC, plentiful financial support, and educated people repatriated from the border camps (Hughes 2003; Ou 2006).

### 3. The Data

The article relies upon three sources. Firstly, we have reviewed the literature on international and Cambodian civil society, NGOs and debates on the topics. Secondly, both authors have undertaken research on civil society and NGOs in this country and collected original national, sub-national and grassroots field data. Information has been gathered at different times from some 80 interviews and discussions with domestic and foreign NGO workers, CBO representatives and members, staff of donor organisations, diplomats, academics and local citizens conducted in 2009, 2011, 2012 and 2013. The authors also sat in on a number of relevant workshops, particularly the one held by rural development NGO CEDAC (Cambodian Centre for Study and Development in Agriculture) on 8 April 2013, in which some 300 saving group representatives from across the country participated. Thirdly, we have also based the paper's conceptualisation, framework and analyses on our observations and deep involvement in the work of NGOs and civil society, helping us to distinguish NGOs from civil society and assess the civil society outcome.

### 4. Civil Society and NGO Fashion: A Conceptual Clarification

Khilnani (2001) contends that civil society is an ambiguous concept with multiple meanings in the Western conception. Nonetheless, the term denotes broadly “the organizational and co-ordinating capabilities of non-state society” (Renshaw 1994 quoted in Hughes 2003: 139) and the political space between the state and the household (McIlwaine 1998). A more widely quoted definition refers to civil society as “an intermediate associational realm between state and family populated by organizations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values” (White 1994: 337-338).<sup>4</sup> Here it connotes organisational structures in addition to the realm of autonomous associations that extend or protect their interests collectively, the current civil society paradigm agreed by other scholars such as Mohan (2002). For south-east Asia, especially Cambodia and Vietnam, Waibel (2013) describes civil society more as processes rather than enduring organisational structures and as continuously living and changing forms; hence, civil society studies should focus more on tracking as opposed to pinning down anything specific. Civil society then in this paper is defined as the arena in which people associate freely in the form of various activities, actions and organisations to advance their interests.

#### 4.1. Non-Government Organisations

The paper takes a generally adopted definition by Gerard Clarke, defining NGOs as “private, non-profit, professional organizations with a distinctive legal character, concerned with public welfare goals” (Clarke 1998: 2-3). NGOs represent professional organisations and primarily

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<sup>4</sup> Civil society is understood and studied from different perspectives. White's definition, which looks at civil society as autonomous in relation to the state, is from a liberal domain. Others, such as Gramsci, also see civil society as a realm between the state, the economy and family, but view it as “an arena of contestation” (Ramasamy 2004: 206). Further, Gramsci posits that although civil society and the state are analytically separable, in reality their boundaries are blurred or indistinguishable (Ramasamy 2004: 43). Several authors (Landau 2008; Henke 2011; Ou 2013) view Cambodian civil society from the Gramscian perspective, arguing that it is more relevant than the liberal one. They suggest that civil society is neither apolitical nor autonomous, but influenced or co-opted by and blurred with the state. This study adopts the liberal perspective for three reasons. First, it is an assessment of the liberal agenda that donors have adopted in the wake of UNTAC's intervention; second, it clarifies and draws attention to a broadly accepted conceptualisation of civil society against other terms, such as NGOs, which are often used interchangeably; finally, it does not at all examine the state-society relationship, to which a Gramscian definition is more relevant.

exist as a *means* or *agent* of civil society (Clark 1997) intending to achieve public goals and empower civil society in developing countries. Playing the role of means of achieving others' ends implies that they have already deviated from the general definition of civil society, because civil society activities and organisations are formed for the sake of their members' benefits. As discussed below, NGOs' lack of grassroots connection or popular base and their upward accountability to donors further indicate that NGOs are not civil society (see Ou and Kim 2013; according to the latest census, 1315 civil society organisations (which this study refers to as NGOs) were open in 2012, of which 1130 (85.9 percent) had funding (CCC 2013: 7).

#### **4.2. Hybrid Civil Society**

Hybrid civil society is a term first applied to Cambodia by Öjendal (2013), who posits that sub-national NGOs and CBOs in Cambodia, of which there are around 25,000 (Ou 2013), should be classified as hybrid because of the coexistence of local, state and foreign interests embedded in them. These civil society bodies are often formed out of the interests of the local people, but usually gain support from NGOs and occasionally have local authorities' involvement as members or even leaders. CBOs are a part of the hybrid phenomenon here because, although they are often established and supported by NGOs (Ngin 2008; World Bank 2009) and donor agencies, leaders and members come from the locality, are attached to and represent the common people and primarily serve local interests, which is different from national NGOs (Ou and Kim 2013). When CBOs manage to function without external support, they should no longer be considered hybrid civil society, but civil society in the true sense. This study also includes NGOs that have transformed themselves into social businesses, which generate profits to benefit society and members rather than a few individual founders, as a form of hybrid civil society.

#### **4.3. Civil Society Organisations, Associations, Collective Actions or Movements**

Civil society organisations, associations, collective actions or movements serve the interests of the members rather than the general public. They include youth groups, trade unions and their federations, occupational associations and the like with a clear membership base.<sup>5</sup> Social movements or events such as demonstrations belong in this group as well. The emerging networks such as CAMPRO (Cambodian Professional Network) are a new form of civil society. In a broader definition, business associations such as rice miller associations, which are also new in Cambodia, can also be captured in this definition of civil society.

#### **4.4. Grassroots Civil Society Organisations, Associations and Movements**

Grassroots civil society organisations, associations and movements are socially and historically embedded and have emerged out of local people's desires, needs, interests and commitments. They can be pagodas and their committees, pot and pan associations, associations for the elderly, funeral groups and the like (Collins 1998; Ehlert 2013). The first and second groups largely materialise out of external support, while the last two represent home grown or organic civil society, emerging from clear social energy and members' interests. Notably, evidence indicates that the last two may be sustainable as they largely rely on members' fees and enthusiasm, while the first two may not be because funding is becoming scarce. That is particularly the case with Phnom Penh-based NGOs, the majority of which depend almost entirely on external support, although CBOs and social businesses may or may not survive as distinct forms.

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<sup>5</sup> If they receive funding from outsiders, they are hybrid civil society as well.

## 5. Civil Society and NGOs on the Donors' Agendas

Before scrutinising the Cambodian situation, we will visit donors' positions on civil society and their aims in enhancing this sector, what organisations and activities they support and some initial outcomes achieved elsewhere.

NGOs have played a major role in the last 30 years; and estimates suggest there are more than 30,000 international NGOs in operation across the globe (Anheier *et al.* 2001: 5). They grow with donors' belief that civil society has the potential to contribute to democratisation in the developing world (Robinson and Friedman 2005). The shift to supporting civil society in the 1980s and 1990s also stemmed from the recognition that political conditions and elections are controversial, and direct engagement in the political process tends to provoke hostility from recipient governments (*ibid.*). Further, civil society gained popularity because overseas aid budgets shrank after the Cold War, and neoliberalism in which privatisation of the state was a key component has gained momentum, (Rieff 1999, cited in Ishkanian 2008). In the same vein, it was found that most donors fund "civil society organisations committed to the promotion of liberal democracy and economic liberalism" (Hearn 1999: 3), with funding concentrated on a small and selected section of civil society (Mohan 2002: 129).

Robinson (1996) observed that donors' promotion of civil society in the democratisation process in transitional countries emanates from several development and political concerns. A donors' perspective is that for development interventions to be effective and sustainable, a high degree of participation from the intended beneficiaries is required. Further, developing economies' adoption and implementation of structural adjustment programmes were "inimical to poverty reduction in the absence of broad-based and sustained economic growth" (*ibid.*: 205). Consequently, NGOs were supplied with funding to compensate for the negative impact. Although participatory development was influential in attracting efforts and funding to promote civil society, donors were more preoccupied with using it to promote democratisation and good governance (*ibid.*). In the 1980s donors largely concentrated on reforms to enhance government competence, but from the early 1990s there was a discernible change to focus also on the demand side of governance. In the absence of the latter, it was believed that institutional and political reform could not be sustained (*ibid.*). Ottaway and Carothers (2000: 293) likewise observed that during the mid-1990s, donors "embraced civil society development as a necessary part of democracy promotion and launched hundreds, even thousands, of projects under that rubric".

Despite the considerable value that donors place on civil society, the term entered the donor discourse without adequate definition; often civil society was conflated with NGOs, or NGOs were perceived "as the most effective mechanism for strengthening civil society" (Robinson 1996: 210). Efforts to strengthen civil society centred on building NGOs' capacity and an enabling environment. Donors also acknowledge that to achieve their stated objectives, they should promote intermediary organisations, encourage governments to support such groups, support grassroots organisations and foster other participatory rural development projects (*ibid.*). In practice, donors ended up mostly supporting urban organisations, which are largely a well-organised section of civil society with political dominance. These "groups are not necessarily representative of civil society in developing countries, either in terms of their numerical significance or geographical and social representativeness" (*ibid.*: 212). Furthermore, there is only weak and fragmentary evidence to support the donors' assumption that development NGOs manage to promote the capacity of grassroots organisations and thus contribute to a vibrant rural civil society (*ibid.*).

Over the past two decades, Cambodia has received similar international support under the above paradigm for enhancing civil society to achieve parallel objectives. Have the donors performed in the way Robinson mentioned, or have they done differently and produced a stronger civil society in this country?

## **6. Efforts to Strengthen Civil Society: Determinants and Outcomes**

### ***6.1. The State after UNTAC and Donors' Agendas***

The government under the ruling party operates with underlying communist and neo-patrimonial principles<sup>6</sup> alongside the stipulated democratic multiparty system. As elsewhere, donors insist on imposing their good governance agenda. Acknowledging that their agenda and an independent civil society are not well received by the government,<sup>7</sup> donors view civil society as the primary means of achieving their objectives. The World Bank, for instance, one of the donors supporting Cambodian NGOs, assigns civil society two critical roles in promoting good governance: 1) demanding the realisation of constitutional rights and challenging unresponsive government, and 2) addressing the needs of vulnerable groups and communities that do not get government services (World Bank 2006, cited in Henke 2011). The former role is in line with that foreseen by UNTAC. The UNDP and the World Bank recently indicated their aim of empowering citizens via NGOs creating demands from below, thus strengthening the demand side of governance. The World Bank for the past few years has funded the government to implement the Demand for Good Governance Programme, in which several state institutions, NGOs and civil society organisations have received grants to pursue reforms. UNDP (2010: 5) states:

Although much has been done in the area of technical capacity building of institutions, little effort has been made to strengthen CSOs<sup>8</sup> and thereby develop the democratic space for citizens at large. This has reduced the effectiveness of UNDP efforts towards democratic governance in Cambodia.

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<sup>6</sup> Communist principles are evidenced by the seriously inadequate separation of powers among the three branches of government, one-party rule and the embedding of the party in the state. Neo-patrimonialism refers to a political system in which the “executive maintains authority through personal patronage, rather than through ideology or law ... relationships of loyalty and dependence pervade a formal politics and administrative system ... leaders occupy bureaucratic offices less to perform public service than to acquire personal wealth and status. The distinction between private and public interests is purposely blurred ... In return for material rewards, clients mobilize political support and refer all decisions upwards as a mark of deference to patrons” (Bratton and van de Walle 1994, cited Pak 2011). Cambodia fits the type of neo-patrimonial state because it has a strong tendency towards centralism, and patronage networks deeply penetrate the state allowing rent seeking to flourish at the expense of formal state institutions; the informal neo-patrimonial system is deep rooted and institutional, thus making reform difficult (Pak 2011: 11; see also Cock 2010; Frewer 2013; Henke 2011).

<sup>7</sup> In policy terms, the government embraces good governance as the core of its overarching development strategy (NSDP Update 2009-2013). In practice, however, governance remains very weak and superficial (Hughes and Un 2011; Hughes 2009; Roberts 2009, 2008); at best, the government has been selective in strengthening a few sectors' governance (Un and Hughes 2011).

That is not to say that the government is homogeneous, (Ou 2013; Un and Hughes 2011), but that there has been a trend to view a quick adoption of good governance by the government as self-defeating (Henke 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Civil society organisations comprise, according to UNDP (2010), NGOs, CBOs, indigenous people's organisations, academia, journalist associations, faith-based organisations, trade unions, trade associations and others.



The Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) also views civil society strengthening as crucial in counterbalancing the state and smoothing democratisation. Sida intends to put more emphasis on direct people empowerment, though NGOs are utilised as a means:

Cambodia's young democracy still has major deficiencies. The country has a multi-party system, but the governing party holds much of the power ... Poor people's rights are strongly limited. Sida is working to distribute power across local levels and to strengthen the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at grassroots level ...

Civil society's role in the democratic process is a key issue ... the power of the governing party needs to be counterbalanced.

As donors largely resort to civil society as a means to achieve their ends, what is the content of existing civil society, i.e. the basis on which donors could build?

## **6.2. *Cambodian Existing Civil Society Revisited***

Pre-war accounts suggest that “a striking feature of Khmer village life is the lack of indigenous, traditional, organized associations, clubs, factions, or other groups that are formed on non-kin principle” (Ebihara 1968: 181) and that Khmer community households in the 1960s were tied not organisationally but by social reciprocity supporting “institutions” of kinship, proximity and familiarity (Ebihara 1974: 306); historically, the Cambodian village is a loose structure (Chandler 2008). Khmer traditional society possesses less community sense than many other agriculture-based Asian societies (Bit 1991). If one looks closely, civil society centres on pagodas largely playing religious, social and developmental roles rather than representing societal interests against the state (Collins 1998). Cambodians are also described as being culturally submissive to higher authority even when facing dictatorial and unfair authority (Mehmet 1997: 683). Until now, the lack of solidarity and collective action in rural areas remains pervasive (Chea *et al.* 2011; Hughes 2009). A recent survey notes no significant change in rural social capital 20 years after the war ended, pointing to strong bonding among relatives and familiars but rather poor linkages between communities and barely existent vertical networks (Sen 2012). That is not to say that Cambodian political culture does not change at all; several studies demonstrate that Cambodian rural society has changed noticeably, especially in response to decentralisation (Öjendal and Kim 2006) and that in certain locations, social groups have emerged rather vibrantly (Johnsen and Prom 2005; Öjendal 2013; Öjendal and Kim 2006). However, it emphasises the weak base or even non-existence of civil society before the arrival of UNTAC (Richmond and Franks 2007: 39), suggesting that development interveners have to consider this social and historical context seriously if they expect civil society to prosper.

## **6.3. *Civil Society Building: Bleak National and Mixed Local Outcomes***

### *6.3.1. National*

**Atomising strategies:** Donors facing a government resisting good governance<sup>9</sup> turn to strengthening civil society to attain their objectives. Given the looseness of Cambodian society and the destruction of war—the lack of organised intermediary structures and mostly diminished forms of organic or home-grown organisations to implement their agendas—donors, international NGOs and other international organisations have from the 1990s crafted

<sup>9</sup> The government is not homogeneous; for instance, its relationship with health NGOs is much better than with education NGOs, and situation is worse when it comes to natural resources such as land and water (Christie 2013).

this domain they call civil society to fulfil their goals (Henke 2011). They have promoted this civil society against the rather unfriendly background of a weak society emerging from fatigue, other cultural and social patterns described above and personal factors to be discussed later. The impositions have resulted in a rather distinct emerging civil society. Hughes (2009: 127) criticises civil society in the same way Robinson (1996) does:

...the activities of “civil society” were limited within pre-set, internationally sanctioned disciplinary boundaries ... support for civil society was associated with a considerable degree of policing, enabled by the offer of funding on a *selective* and competitive basis [emphasis added].

She explains that donors’ “atomising strategies” have created a divide between the haves (organisations with financial and training support from donors) and the have-nots (social movements and collective actions with little or no support from donors), and “have a far-reaching effect on the development of local civil society” (*ibid.*). Hughes (2009) points out that some collective actions, such as those by trade unions, have deserved more support than the very little they have received. Again, financial and other forms of assistance have targeted only specific groups of NGOs, as Robinson (1996) observed.

This is echoed in a recent study by Christie (2013: 91):

... the promotion of civil society has, in policy terms, continued to focus on the creation of NGOs rather than broader forms of associations. In part this is a result of the funding for civil society creation flowing through development agencies that wish to see various projects implemented in Cambodia, which lends itself to a support of LNGOs.

Donors’ support strategies, as Hughes (2009) discovers, have resulted in the tendency for them to fund particular groups, especially established or strong NGOs with a good record of delivering donors’ expected outputs. This is clearly demonstrated by a fairly small group of NGOs representing this sector. Although close to 3000 local NGOs and associations have registered with the Ministry of Interior,<sup>10</sup> the latest census found that only slightly more than 30 percent remained open and had funding (CCC 2013: 7); earlier it was observed that of several hundred active NGOs, an estimated 100 dominated this domain and only 30-40 were viewed as strong (Khlok 2003). Donors’ desire to control where their funds go and to get results are substantiated by the director of an INGO:

There are few channels where we can get information about which NGOs we can trust to be able to deliver the set outputs; we usually informally talk among ourselves [INGOs and donors] about who each of us is funding, and via such communication we learn about the recipient NGOs’ records and very often we support those which we’re told have performed well ... Recently, given the emerging conflicts around land, water and fisheries in rural areas, and in response to increasing awareness of a rights-based approach, we have started to slowly support community-based organisations via our national partner NGOs. We cannot give [to] them directly ... it’s too difficult to manage the fund, and we possess insufficient capacity to do so. (INGO director, interview, Phnom Penh, 22 December 2011)

Likewise, Catalla and Catalla (2001: 40) observed:

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<sup>10</sup> According to the Ministry of Interior, two categories of organisations are registered—local NGOs and associations; in practice, local associations function in almost the same way as local NGOs (Ou 2006).

... donors are giving money to fewer NGOs and focusing more on results ... adjusting their program according to where the money is. As a result, LNGOs do not address the needs of the most marginalized groups and there is a tendency to replicate projects. They also measure success in terms of completion of activities instead of impact.

As resources for NGOs in the country shrink, donors further concentrate on the established ones to ensure that their expectations are met, leaving the weaker ones to die one by one (interview with NGO senior staff, Phnom Penh, 22 April 2013). The overall fieldwork confirms this trend.

**Strong civil society vs. donors' influence:** Given Cambodia's huge development needs, NGOs concentrate 70 percent on development and service delivery and only roughly 7 percent on advocacy, human rights and democracy work (Henke 2011; the figure is up to 80 percent according to CCC 2012). Although NGOs have had substantial impact economically (contributing to the people's well-being) and democratically (informing people about their rights, increasing public expectations of civil servants), their "impact should not be interpreted as a sign of a strong civil society ... rather a reflection of the strong presence of the international community" (SPM Consultants 2006: 13). In the same vein, a study by the World Bank (2009: ii) is worth quoting at length to illustrate the nature of donor-initiated and supported NGOs.

Most professional NGOs in Cambodia today owe their existence more to the influence and financial support of international donors than to the gradual opening up of democratic space, the natural scaling up of grassroots organizations, the emergence of a culture of volunteerism/social activism, or the organized charity of an established middle class. NGOs are highly donor dependent and most lack grassroots links. If civil society is understood in the sense of 'the public arena where people freely associate to advance common interests', then Cambodian civil society remains unarguably weak.

The nature of donor-supported civil society is radically described by Richmond and Franks (2007: 39):

... it is widely argued that 'civil society' does not really exist in Cambodia. According to this view, it emerged in the UNTAC era, facilitated by donor funding ... Civil society is quite possibly an illusionary 'virtual' or 'parallel' society created by the presence and funding of the internationals, and mainly visible to international eyes. Far from aiding the development and sustainability of an indigenous civil society, it is representative of conditionality and dependency rather than local agency.

**NGOs' accountability and participation under pressure:** Two other important areas (also arguably resulting from donors' support) are also worth examining closely: an NGO's lines of accountability and the nature of its participation visibly characterise its quality.

Because of their dependence on donor support, Cambodian NGOs risk adjusting their accountability upwards to donors rather than to the targeted groups. A sizeable study by the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC 2010: 31-32) puts NGOs' upward accountability as the main governance challenge:

Most accountability practices are predominantly upward ... As most NGOs are donor dependent, their decision making, not unexpectedly, [is] influenced greatly



by their donors/development partners. In defining strategic focus or directions ... the priority concerns or issues of communities become secondary to donor priorities and agenda[s].

Others observe that NGOs are compromising their own agendas and becoming passive because of their dependence on donors (Un 2006), and that NGOs reconcile foreign concepts and agendas with local sociocultural and political realities to survive (World Bank 2009). While a few established or relatively strong NGOs manage to attain autonomy in relation to donors, the majority remain weak and thus vulnerable to orienting their accountability upwards (Ou 2006). Recently, because donors have fewer funds available, they have been more careful in choosing local counterparts “to implement their projects” (Norman 2010: 186). Godfrey *et al.* (2000: 15-16) found that NGOs function in most ways as executing agencies of donors. The decrease of funding for advocacy NGOs, in particular from the early 2000s due to donors’ questioning of the effectiveness of NGOs in accelerating reforms, has driven even the most established and respected advocacy NGOs to follow donors’ agendas so as to sustain funding; the situation worsened from 2005 (Parks 2008). The pressure was described by one NGO director: “We suffer from the lack of funding support; though we have fund-raising strategies in place and I have to work through weekends till I get sick, it remains unsecured” (interview, Phnom Penh, 27 December 2011). An INGO senior advisor, who has closely observed the funding trend, agreed: “As of the end of 2011, whenever and wherever there is a grant, NGOs crowd in like ants gathering to eat sugar” (interview, Phnom Penh, 28 December 2011). That causes severe competition among NGOs, especially those operating in the same area (interview, NGO senior staff, Phnom Penh, 22 April 2013). In such a situation, maintaining their independence and prioritising their beneficiaries are truly challenging tasks. The national scarcity of funding and consequences have already travelled down to provincial NGOs, as confirmed by our fieldwork in late 2011, early 2012 and 2013.

To be able serve public goals, NGOs are supposed to stay connected with target beneficiaries to keep themselves informed and responsive to grassroots demands. In reality, however, there is adequate evidence that participation and linkages between NGOs and the target groups are lean. Repeated evaluations by Sida note that Cambodian NGOs have a low degree of voluntary and popular participation (SPM Consultants 2003, 2006). Others point to NGOs being created externally but not organically, when explaining the lack of grassroots links (World Bank 2009). Likewise, Un (2004: 272) calls the Cambodian NGO sector a “civil movement without citizens”, and Hughes (2003: 162) agreed that the professional traits of NGOs create a space between themselves and the rural villages they regard as their “members”. A recent UNDP (2010: 25) assessment states:

When advocacy is driven by grassroots movements, there is no doubt about the representativity or legitimacy of these organizations. The question though is legitimate when referred to NGOs. NGOs are non-representative institutions by their same nature, particularly true in Cambodia where NGOs are sometime seen as an elitist group disconnected with the grassroots.

Recently, natural resource conflicts (especially around land issues) have intensified, and it seems NGOs, especially human rights groups, have supported and represented the victims better; however, this support is often questioned as to whether it has appropriately nurtured the social movements and groups, as Henke and Well-Dang examine below. A development researcher takes the middle ground:

NGOs on the one hand assist the land victims; on the other, they pursue the objectives cautiously and in a calculated manner to guarantee their survival as well,

especially when the cases are sensitive involving prominent business individuals who are backed up by armed soldiers and police. Hence, NGOs have produced mixed results in representing and protecting the vulnerable groups (Interview, 11 January 2012)

In advocacy and in connection with critical matters of accountability, representation and links between NGOs and constituents, Christie (2013: 112) notes the gap between expectations found in the civil society literature and the actual behaviour of NGOs in Cambodia:

NGOs are seldom constituted by communities, but more often are outside organizations that try to speak on behalf of sections of society. The notion then, that they will put the needs of a community above the needs and expectations of the NGO, is far from a given ... NGOs are often not the leaders to advocate on behalf of communities. NGOs are afraid of the repercussions that are likely to come from the government—especially in the area of land rights. As a result, a large number of Cambodian NGOs have stepped away from these issues.

On the responsiveness of local branches of Phnom Penh-based NGOs, Christie (2013: 119) observes “... in Cambodia NGOs rarely emerge from the local communities”, and that groups that have a central office (usually in the capital) lack autonomy to accommodate local demands because the policy direction is led from the centre; he concludes “... the argument that NGOs are likely to be more responsive to [a] community’s interests than the government is based in large part on ungrounded assumptions that do not bear out in practice”.

Another factor distancing NGO staff from the beneficiaries is NGO salaries. Christie (2013: 91) points out that the public sector offers smaller financial incentives than NGOs do, and a segment of urban-educated individuals join NGOs,<sup>11</sup> creating a higher salary class than the average. He adds that NGO people having better education and higher living standards than the average raises the question of how much NGOs are able to grasp local needs (*ibid*: 131). Another assessor of NGOs in Ratanakkiri, Frewer (2013: 111-112), writes “... the financial imperative to work in an NGO and support distant family members often means many NGOs function in a similar way to businesses”.

All these considerations prompt Christie (2013: 65) to conclude:

NGOs may not be representative of civil society; nor do they necessarily act in ways that are likely to achieve the presumed benefits of providing for a vibrant civil society. Indeed, in some instances *NGOs may actually erode local forms of civil society* as resources are moved into formal associational forms that echo Northern development agencies [emphasis added].

Given the weaknesses inside NGOs, we agree with Henke’s (2011: 294-295) conclusion that Cambodian NGOs are *not* civil society:

This cadre of “donor created” NGOs ... should not ... be equated with the emergence of a broader, indigenous Cambodian “civil society”... [They] are not membership organizations and have no active constituency or social base... NGOs’ dependence on international funding... gives them “strong incentives to cater to donors” programmatic priorities and reporting requirements and weak incentives to respond and account to grassroots constituencies.

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<sup>11</sup> In a recent survey, the majority of NGO recruits had bachelor’s or postgraduate degrees (CCC 2013: 7).

**Room for optimism:** While the above is the general trend, a few cases that do not fall into that scenario are worth noting. In our interviews, we found the executive director of a teacher association who is very committed to serving the interests of public school teachers across the country. From the interview, the association survives with little donor support or membership fees; however, the organisation was active until he was imprisoned for a short period in late 2005 for criticising a border agreement between Cambodia and Vietnam. However, he has continued to defend teachers and seek pay rises for them (interview, Phnom Penh, 27 December 2009). Hughes (2003) reminds us that voluntary activities, as opposed to paid NGO work, do exist on some occasions, such as during election time. In her study, human rights and electoral observer NGOs depend on voluntary networks to pass on information about human rights abuses and electoral violations in rural areas. Such efforts are quite risky and involve the expense in travelling to provincial NGO offices to make reports. In a survey of 107 volunteers working in that endeavour, only two expressed interest in becoming activists to make a career (Hughes 2003: 151). Yonekura is even more optimistic, challenging the accusation (often made by foreign aid workers) that Cambodians set up organisations as a source of income. Of 60 the civil society organisations included in her 2009 study, 18 had leaders who had sacrificed a higher paid and more stable job to work with NGOs and 33 had leaders working without wages (though some expected to draw a salary at the later stage) (Yonekura 1999: 89-90). A similar case is the executive director who quit her high income job with the UN and bilateral agencies to manage a small NGO. She related:

I had a better job earlier. I used to work for UNDP, USAID, CARITAS and JICA; however, I felt there was too little space for me to contribute to the country, and my decision-making was not respected. I then decided to join the local NGO with the hope I could do more in this domain. (Interview, Phnom Penh, 27 December 2011)

The spirit of volunteerism grew even stronger and the number involved vastly expanded, particularly among youths, on and around the national election day, 28 July 2013 (VOA 10 July 2013). Importantly, the degree of popular participation during this election grew significantly (RFA 29 July 2013), much more than during previous elections. It was clear prior to and on the election day that people understood and attached a strong value to their vote, and some even waited to hear the result at their polling station and left only after the counting was completed.<sup>12</sup> The growth of civic engagement and popular discontent was triggered, arguably, by reasons such as the widespread use of social media (Soeung 2013; Kyodo 23 July 2013), social injustice resulting from economic land concessions, social inequality (Springer 2010), the weak justice and judicial system (Un and So 2012; Un 2006), the more united and stronger opposition party and a relatively free society after more than two decades of multiparty democracy. However, NGOs' contribution should also be credited. The fundamental question is whether the emerging social energy could transform into stronger social capital and thereby more organic civil society organisations or movements beyond the election. The fact that a few NGOs have been quite effective in triggering or setting up grassroots groups is noted (World Bank 2009). Below the empirical discussions on such emerging and vibrant local groups illustrate local outcomes.

**Beyond donor money:** Despite all the shortcomings, donor support has triggered some forms of hybrid civil society (Öjendal 2013; Ou and Kim 2013). For instance, Hagar and Friends International have become social businesses, generating profits to serve marginalised groups (such as poor students and orphans working for the organisations) rather than particular

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<sup>12</sup> The authors' personal observations at several polling stations and evidence from sources including facebook confirm this.

individuals. NGOs such as CEDAC, which has gradually started to generate funding via its work for sustainability and has generally been quite successful, also falls into this category. Others have been absorbed into the government (Feuer 2013), while others transformed into private consultancy firms (such as the Economic Institute of Cambodia and Cambodian Economic Association).

### 6.3.2. Local

NGOs' empowerment of grassroots organisations has produced mixed results so far.

Henke's (2011) evaluation of donor support to social movements and CBOs protecting natural resources (fisheries, forests and land) suggests that such networks and collective actions are largely not strengthened, though in most cases the issues were initially taken up by the local people. Similarly to the NGO-donor modality, he points to the rather inappropriate donor model that hinders popular solidarity; for him, the power, strategies and resources of national NGOs and other donors threaten the delicate local coalitions, particularly because they structurally require the network leaderships' upward accountability to funders ahead of local mobilisation. Such support, where CBOs and local networks are NGO-ised as some leaders and staff get per diems and salaries, creates jealousy and de-legitimises activists because they are viewed as NGO staff; further, the training provided to activists takes much of their time, leaving them with less time for their community (Henke 2011; interview, 23 December 2011). In a similar network study, Wells-Dang discovered that Cambodian rural community networks (seeking to protect their interests during dam building in north-eastern Cambodia) are aloof from Phnom Penh-located support NGOs. Local network activists have expressed discontent that, despite NGO support, in sensitive cases they are arrested, not the NGO workers (Wells-Dang 2013).

However, a more nuanced examination of CBO development should reveal the other side of the coin. Öjendal (2013) puts the evolution of Cambodian NGOs this way. The first phase (from early to late 1990s) was almost all about money following NGOs; international ideas, interests and *modus operandi* were dominant and local civil society barely existed. The second phase (from late 1990s to mid-2000s) was about NGOs moving from the centre to rural areas. That stage was marked by the transfer of more responsibilities from INGOs to local ones, and the latter becoming stronger internally; both international and local NGOs started supporting local initiatives such as CBOs. In the third phase (from mid-2000s onwards), CBOs have established a presence in every village, and these local CBOs have filled the gap with local initiatives but with support from NGOs; this is what Öjendal (2013) calls a hybrid phenomenon. He argues that though this phenomenon occurs without problems such as elite capture, those CBOs may be unsustainable once funds run out. They run into difficulties in embracing popular participation, and end up chasing NGOs' agendas. Amid these negative impacts, a number of positive points have emerged: the Cambodianisation of civil society (the shifting of interests from the internationals to the locals) and the emergence of intermediary institutions that have not been present before (*ibid.*). "An often quoted study of Cambodian rural life is titled 'When Every Household Is an Island'. The farmers in Tram Kok are showing how rapidly this title may become history" (Johnsen and Prom 2005: 2). Johnsen and Prom were referring to the rapid spread and energy of farmer producer and saving groups.

Further, while some CBOs, such as those working on fisheries and forestry, have struggled to survive (Henke 2011), others such as saving groups and village banks, which are often initially supported by NGOs, have tended to be better functioning and more sustainable, not only creating a sense of civil society but also reducing poverty in rural areas (Chhay 2011; Hiwasa 2013). Some farmer organisations (initially supported by NGOs such as CEDAC)

have performed well beyond donors' support (Hiwasa 2013; interview, 23 December 2011). A researcher who observed some cases in Takeo province revealed:

The interesting thing that promotes governance and functioning of these farmer organisations lies in the simple fact that they produce organic produce; hence, they have to be sincere among themselves, and be watchful of each other. If it is found that chemicals are applied to any vegetables or crops, every member of the organisation will suffer; there will be no buyers who offer a good price. (Interview, 25 January 2012)

Those studies are confirmed by recent fieldwork in Takeo with saving groups set up by CEDAC. The emergence of hundreds of enthusiastic farmers and farmer leaders organising themselves into saving groups and producer groups is very telling; the case was noted earlier as well (World Bank 2009). In the First Assembly on Saving, organised by CEDAC on 8 May 2013, some 300 saving groups participated for a full day (rather than drifting away after the morning session) presenting their successes and challenges and exchanging knowledge and experiences. During the event, a CEDAC representative declared that of some 5000 saving groups created between 1997 and 2013, at least 3000 have survived with combined funds of around USD13 million and involving close to 100,000 people in 17 provinces. The participants voluntarily paid their own travel costs, food and accommodation, which was the first large-scale assembly funded by farmers themselves, based on our observations. A random check among citizens in Tramkok demonstrated that some really joined the saving group and found it beneficial (interview, April 2013).

Feuer (2013) describes CEDAC programmes as initially involving agricultural training, creating room for basic farmer gatherings but not civic engagement. Later, however, they evolve into local saving and producer groups, which end up in national farmer organisations and have boosted civic engagement and empowered civil society. He adds that such activities can become platforms for organising if the village faces environmental or political threats and that the thickness and collectivity of farmer networks from the ground to the national level have increased the rural community's power relative to the state.

Our fieldwork in Kampot gave us an opportunity to view a specific case of a provincial NGO, Khmer Community for Agricultural Development (KCAD), which is led by a former government official who could not continue working in the government for political reasons. The NGO, receiving little donor support during its initial phase in 1995 and other funding from the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training, trains people on farm machinery and agronomy. It is unique in sustaining itself for nearly 20 years with few outside resources, and depends on income generated by the director and a few staff members from training activities and fixing machines. The director expressed satisfaction because he could work freely, transferring knowledge obtained in Russia and Vietnam, unlike in the public sector, where he was stressed. He treats his position as a part-time job and has other work to generate income. This fits well the notion of civil society as a free zone in which people are comfortable pursuing their interests. Here it should be noted that he could not have established the NGO without the initial donor support and other minor support (interview, 27 April 2013).

Another researcher shared the concerns about the struggle for sustainability among community fisheries, but noted the progress of those that have been able to generate sizeable revenues and might be sustainable after external support is withdrawn. The fascinating development is that those community fisheries have invested their earnings by creating saving groups and letting the members borrow at low interest. That kind of activity allows them to generate income to sustain themselves, though their long term prospects are far from certain. His main point was



that this important local development would not have occurred without NGO support (interview, 10 December 2012). More importantly, Sok (2013) finds that some of his informants are enthusiastic about community fisheries they believe to be successful. NGO support has brought to the surface local people's commitment to protect their common pool resources such that they have mobilised to engage in good work.



Left: The dusty office of KCAD measures roughly 3.5 m by 2.5 m. Right: The training workshop of KCAD, from which irregular income is generated to sustain the NGO. Pictures used by permission of KCAD.

## 7. Discussion: Other Factors

Based on the assumed potential of civil society in democratisation, donors have given tremendous support to this sector. However, in Cambodia, it has resulted primarily in a situation that Garton Ash describes: “We dreamed of civil society and got NGOs” (Garton Ash 2004, cited in Ishkanian 2008: 61). Given the evidence pointing to the concentration of resources in a particular segment of NGOs, and the characteristics of NGOs and their staff which deviate from the notion of civil society, it is time that donors reconsider their civil society strengthening strategies, especially to draw lessons from those donors and NGOs that have demonstrated good practices as indicated in this study and others such as Ngin (2008), Öjendal (2013), Öjendal and Kim (2012) and World Bank (2009). A suggestion is to have a comprehensive academic study rather than a consultancy project documenting the major lessons and other specific anthropological studies on what works. This would help inform donors with valid evidence, important for shaping future strategies.

While the various accounts above point to a weak national civil society relying almost entirely on donors and operating in an environment not conducive to civil society growth, we maintain that civil society's shortcomings are partially the consequence of other overlooked matters such as Cambodian culture and vested personal interests, NGO staff's prioritisation of their employment and benefits over beneficiaries' benefits and the lack of legislation to govern this sector.

Despite concerted efforts by donors to promote democratic codes within NGOs, various studies document the weak governance structures of many organisations. Democratic principles are often intertwined with embedded structures of hierarchy, nepotism and patronage, autocratic and authoritarian leadership, and secrecy (Henke 2011; Kem 2013; Richardson 2001). In the same vein, the case study of an NGO by Gellman (2010) showed that though well funded (giving time for the NGO to pursue its mission and vision), the NGO had not practised civil society values internally; for example, though its staff were sufficiently educated, they were not allowed to be much involved in decision-making, and responsibilities and authority stayed almost totally with the executive director. Beyond this case, the study noted similar attitudes

and practices of other NGO leaders (Gellman 2010). Another paper reported, “Transparency is mainly understood in financial terms and rarely in terms of decision making processes. The practice of democracy is limited” (CCC 2010: 31). Over the years, this situation has not improved but, based on an empirical comparison between 2003 and 2006, seems to be getting worse (SPM Consultants 2006). This study further revealed: “Encouraging the introduction of more democratic structure in [older and larger organisations] with established ways of operating has proven difficult” (*ibid.* 12). A research colleague who has good knowledge of Phnom Penh-based NGOs and their networks cited an indicative example:

I can see how authoritarian her leadership is. She not only exercises dominance over the staff but also owns the organisation; she has fired staff she dislikes and sometimes recruits her own family members and relatives. For the network itself, it is getting more difficult to manage to ensure effectiveness because now they have secured some funding and every member fights to run the secretariat. (Interview, Phnom Penh, February 2012)

Ou and Kim (2013) also find that some individual NGO workers seek a comfort zone in the NGO world and pay less attention to improving lives and empowering the beneficiaries. This happens also in other places, as Focus on the Global South observes: “Most CSOs are trapped in the capitalist development ‘narrative’ themselves and the development industry is a rewarding employer” (cited in Henke 2011: 295). Some of them prioritise their own resource above civil society strengthening. Donors are aware of this but have no choice. Opportunism in the aid market was quite common in the 1990s (Vickery and Amer 1996).<sup>13</sup> Parks (2008: 217) recall, “While the number of Cambodian NGOs increased rapidly in response to funding opportunities, many of these new organisations lacked capacity and experience. Some were just trying to make money.” Interestingly, Nowaczyk (2009: 25) reported that some NGOs were still being “set up for employment purposes rather than assisting the poor”.

Another important area often overlooked is legislation to govern the NGO sector. NGO legislation involves potential for conflict because, as some contend, the proposed NGO law could curtail NGOs’ activities, especially those to do with human rights and advocacy (Henke 2011). NGO legislation would also bring benefits and opportunities to enhance NGO legitimacy and accountability (Mayhew 2005). Mayhew’s comparative study found Cambodia more lacking in NGO legislation than Bangladesh, Vietnam and Nepal, which partly hinders the sector’s accountability to beneficiaries and government. She concludes, “Cambodia lies at the lower end of the spectrum, being in need of ... NGO sector strengthening ... NGOs—particularly local—go unchecked and stories of corruption are rife” (Mayhew 2005: 753).

## 8. Conclusion

Carrying their sound good governance agenda, UNTAC, various donors and INGOs have encountered a government characterised by neo-patrimonial and former communist traits resistant to governance reforms. When they resort to civil society, it turns out to be a historically empty space entrenched with its own culture, making it difficult for democratic ideas and ideals to flourish. Their decision to strengthen a civil society with limited potential, especially with their objective of using NGOs to achieve good governance, has resulted in donors supporting a shrinking number of NGOs to the exclusion of other civil society organisations and movements that deserve support. The relatively few active NGOs generally do not share civil society characteristics, so they should not be termed strengthened civil society despite their undeniable

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<sup>13</sup> Vickery and Amer found a number of NGOs having no members, no board and accountable only to the donors, who were eager to spend money in Cambodia.

impact and influence. While the national civil society outcome so far is weak, it is a rather common phenomenon as documented by Robinson (1996): donors have no alternative ways of handling the challenges, and local contexts should share the blame for this bleak result.

However, Cambodian NGOs have triggered some vibrant local civil society groups, especially saving groups, across the country—an unseen but positive development. At this early stage, though we are cautiously optimistic, our preliminary conclusions suggest a high possibility that donors make a difference in strengthening a widespread grassroots civil society in Cambodia. Plenty of successes and failures are available to be learned from. Patience, time and curiosity are required to grasp local nuances before acting to empower or not empower local civil society.

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