

# Decentralisation: Can Civil Society Enhance Local Government's Accountability in Cambodia?

Kim Sedara and Ann Sovatha examine the role of an organic group, School Support Committee (SSC) and a mandated group, Fishery Community (FC) in enhancing the accountability between elected commune councils to electorates.\*

Cambodian post-conflict society has only recently taken steps towards thorough democratisation. With the first commune election in 2002, the country embarked on decentralisation reform with the aim to promote democratisation and cultivate a culture of participation and trust between state and society. The presence of civil society groups and associations at the local level is very significant in terms of strengthening and supporting the commune councils (CCs) (Mansfield and Macleod 2004, Rusten et al 2004, Ojendal 2005, Blunt and Turner 2005, Hughes 2005). One of the key challenges for the success or failure of decentralisation reform concerns the level of partnership and collaboration between civil society and local government. Decentralisation in Cam-

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bodia faces a number of obstacles, such as insufficient interaction between civil society groups and commune councils, and lack of devolution of resources and power from the central government (Ninh and Henke 2005, CCC Special Research Report 2004, Rusten et al 2004, Hughes 2005). Such factors hamper the elected commune councils from being fully accountable and responsive to the demands from the electorate.

One important question concerns *the degree to which the existing civil society organisations can enhance the level of accountability of local government towards the electorate*. Although there are many local associations in rural Cambodia, this article will limit its scope to two committees which were established under the *subdecree* and *Prakas* of the government. The centrepiece of analysis is to compare two local groups, aiming to understand the concept of sustainability and participation. The School Support Committee (SSC) is an “organic group” which is commonly found in most of rural Cambodia. The Fishery Community (FC) is a “state mandated group” which exists only in the areas where there are fishing zones. There are differences between the two committees. The SSC has strong sustainability, good participation from parents and teachers as all members and parents are committed. However, the fishing community (FC) has little strength because the people's participation is low, the members do not have enough decision making power and lack support from the technical line department. All this reflects problems of sustainability and maintaining trust from the electorate.

## Existing local groups/committees

Several local civil society groups can be identified in rural communities of Cambodia. These groups can be categorised into two main groups: i) the organic groups refer to the indigenous associations/committees that have existed in communities for a long period of time and are collectively initiated by local citizens. They exist in all communes (e.g, Wat committees and the School Support Committees SSC) and ii) the mandated groups refer to associations or organisations that are es-

Organic groups	Mandated groups
<i>Wat or Pagoda Committee</i> , usually representing more than one village, consists of old, respected volunteers and other who help and represent the Pagoda. Normally there is no election involved.	Water Association is created with the responsibility to share water among farmers and maintain and construct irrigation systems in the community.
School Support Committee (SSC) is usually a group of respected people, teachers, school directors, local authority representatives, and parents. The main task is to safeguard and ensure the ongoing operation of the school.	Community Forestry is set up to safeguard the forest, to protect the forest from illegal logging, and to re-plant the forest. This committee mostly receives technical support from international NGOs but it is not part of commune jurisdiction.
Traditional music group: normally is part of the Wat committee and helps teach young children traditional music, helps poor families and communities in cases of funerals and performs during rituals and various occasions of ritual ceremonies.	Fishing Community, located near or on the fishing zone, is a watchdog group, the establishment of which was enabled by the government in 2001 when the government released 52% of private fishing lots to communities. The main duty of this community is to protect the fishing zones from illegal fishing and cooperate with fishery offices and local authorities. Often this fishing community receives technical support from various international NGOs.
Funeral Committee, not a permanent group, is formed to help poor families who cannot afford proper funeral ceremonies.	Women's Association: the purpose of this association is to encourage women to take part in development in the communities and to help them promote gender awareness. Normally this association is created with financial and technical support from NGOs.

established by international NGOs or initiated by the government's regulations. These types of groups occur in some specific communes where there are suitable geographical conditions (e.g. community forestry and fishing community) (Kim 2004). The table below presents these two categories.

Besides the groups mentioned above there are various types of local associations such as saving associations, mid-wife associations, youth associations, traditional music groups, help the ageing associations, and dry season rice cultivation associations. Two committees, the planning and budgeting committee (PBC), the maintenance and procurement committee (PC) are not included in the list above since they were established within the Commune/Sangkat law.

### **School Support Committee (SSC)**

Although the SSC is not as old as the Wat committee, it has been present at the local level for long time. It usually consists of a group of respected elders, teachers, village chiefs, the members of development committees, commune councillors and parents (Kim 2004). The SSC's head and members are elected by villagers. Each SSC consists of 8-15 permanent members, mostly two or three from each village. The common members are parents who have their children in school. The recruitment process is based on the consensus of the villagers. The village chiefs and commune councillors usually identify individuals directly and ask whether she or he is willing to be part of the SSC. Each individual must meet certain criteria such as being educated, popular, and respected by the majority of villagers. The charismatic people are preferred since the SSC members need to do fund-raising. In the past and also the present, many primary schools were located in the Wat compound. Often the local people do not understand the SSC and Parent Association (PA). It should be noted that in some rare cases, PA is a separate body from SSC.

### **Strengths of SSC**

A number of factors contributing to the success of the SSC can be identified. Firstly, as SSC is traditionally embedded within the local community, it has good interaction with commune authorities and parents. This means that SSC has fewer problems fund-raising. Furthermore, with these good relations, information sharing between SSC and commune councils can be made on a regular basis in the form of meetings through which advice from the community can also be sought. CC is interested in seeing that SSC works effectively to help the community. Both SSCs and CCs are able to build trust with one another. Secondly, operation of SSCs has not been interrupted by other agencies. The technical line department, though supporting the SSC, does not interfere with SSC decision-making, meaning that there is no problem for abuse of power from authorities on SSC. Lastly, since its vision is to support and promote education, which benefits the whole community, SSC has succeeded in attracting people's participation and ensuring members' commitment. This is an important factor contributing to sustainability of the group.

### **Challenges faced by SSC**

Although SSC is arguably successful in implementing its roles, it still faces a number of challenges. Firstly, as SSC is a volunteer group, it is hard to maintain lasting and sincere commitments from the members. Due to low living standards, not all of the members are able to work regularly. Only the leader and deputy are active and knowledgeable. Secondly, weak social capital such as networking, trust, and institutional linkages in rural Cambodia contributes to other obstacles to the SSC. It is rare that the SSC is able to build relationships with other committees in the same communes or outside of commune (social capital or inter-committee interaction is weak). Inter-organisation relationships happen only with NGOs. Lastly, inadequate or opaque information flow between school, SSC, and the government is also a concern. With this lack of communication, SSC and school are often not well informed about government policies. A lack of information sharing between school and SSC has also caused occasional misunderstandings. Therefore, although SSC has a number of strengths, it still faces problems such as lack of financial incentives, absence of inter-group collaboration, and insufficient information sharing.

### **Inter-organisation interactions**

Inter-organisational interactions serve as a key to success of local civil society groups. The interactions should be among local groups and between local groups and local authorities (CCs). This leads SSC to be successful because it has good relations with commune councils. Limited interactions between CCs and local organisations is a sign of lack of social capital in rural society in Cambodia. Local organisations do not have willingness to work together within institutional linkages. This aspect is reflected within the SSC. All of the people affiliated with SSC that we talked to, said that they were neither interested in working with or willing to learn about the activities of other organisations, even though each commune has similar organisations and associations. The reason of the lack of such interaction is because they do not want to be accused of interfering in the business of other organisations. Relationships occur only with the NGOs or relevant authorities that serve as the partners with SSC, such as the district education office and the commune council. This gap of inter-community interaction might be caused by a lack of self-confidence, the culture of listening to authoritarian rule, and a desire for non-interference.

In sum, the reason of a successful SSC depends on people's participation, sharing information within the group, getting technical support from the line departments, establishing a good relationship with commune councils. However, this success does not fully contribute to a long term, sustainable development due to some problems such as lack of information sharing from relevant actors and weak institutional collaboration to help the community develop.

### **Fishery Community (FC)**

The subdecree of Royal Government of Cambodia

(RGC, 27/5/2003) states that community fisheries must be created with technical and administrative support from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery (MAFF) along with local initiatives. Most of the FCs were created in collaboration with international NGOs, getting technical support from relevant line departments, and closely supported by local authorities. Many of these FCs were established during of 2001-2002 but some were started in 2004.

Only those villages bordering the fishing zone are on the FC. Normally, all households in those villages are eligible to be members of FC. The size of the FC committee depends on the number of households, and the average number of committee members ranges from 5-14. All members are volunteers and must be elected by other members. The committee members are selected from each village. Once the committee members are elected, they will select deputies, a treasurer, and a secretary. Usually, the chiefs and deputies are invited for management and technical training, which is offered with support from international NGOs. The effectiveness of FC members depends on the level of awareness about the situation of fishing in the community. Many committee members interviewed expressed concerns about the degradation of the fish stock in the lakes and streams. Many people revealed that the decline of fish is caused by illegal fishing and by non-functioning management by relevant authorities.

Information from the focus group discussion shows that many members of community are having similar objective of safeguarding natural resources and environment in community. Findings have suggested that with this objective, FC has played a number of roles. It has been a watchdog to curb illegal fishing in the community and reporting/providing information to relevant authorities, and a liaison body for fishery department and commune councils. FC has also cooperated with local authorities in order to play this role more effectively in combating illegal fishing. It has also played a role in educating and disseminating information to people not to conduct anything destructive to the resources in the community. However, there is a long list of responsibilities for FC to implement as mentioned in the sub-decree. The actual role of FC is being an information provider to relevant authorities and disseminating information to local villagers.

### **Challenges faced by FC**

The FCs face a number of challenges. First, they are not financially independent. The problem of slow implementation is a result of the lack of resources and equipment to combat fishery crimes. The lack of genuine support from the technical authority has also contributed to this problem. Second, the ineffectiveness of FC is further complicated by the shortage of full and sincere participation from the members, some of whom fear revenge from perpetrators should they be involved in cracking down on fishery crimes. The absence of any mechanism to protect group members from such retaliation puts FC in a very awkward position. Such obstacles have made the FC's sustainability uncertain. Without genuine participation and whole-hearted support from

the authorities, the future of the FCs in playing its role effectively remains a concern.

### **Inter-organisation interactions**

Both the FC and the SSC lack institutional support. The only institution that FC normally seeks support from is the commune council but FC puts little hope in CCs because CCs do not have enough power to solve problems. Meetings between FC and CC seldom occur. From interviews with CC members, CC is still curious and eager to learn about the performance of all other local associations. But Cambodian villagers are traditionally reluctant about seeking assistance or exchanging information with authorities unless they have a serious problem. This is a downside of civil society in rural Cambodia because each association works separately.

Although the establishment of FC was combined with local initiative, it is also a requirement by the government. From the civil society standpoint, FC does not gradually emerge out of a society with densely formed social capital. The authors observed that most of the FC members feel that they are affiliated with or are the staff of a local authority. FC members claim to have real power on decision making which is correct, but they also are accountable to those authorities rather than to the villagers. They are too dependent on the agencies above that created them and forget that they are elected by the people. This is upward accountability (*amnach tak leu*). FC tries very hard to solve complaints from villagers, reporting and seeking intervention from the technical line department, but none of these complaints have been articulated. Thus the FC faces the problem of losing trust with villagers.

The strength of the FC is limited due to people's lack of trust and participation; little sustainability prevails because FC does not function properly; there is weak inter-organisational collaboration; power on decision making is weak. From outward appearances, FC is a civil society group which was born from a local initiative. However, most FCs were established by NGOs with a legal framework from the government, though local initiative is also part of the formation. There is real confusion among the members of FC because of blurred loyalties, how to be accountable to the local people in spite of being affiliated with NGOs and other institutions. Also there is confusion as to who is the boss of the FC. FC view that they are beholden to whomever established the organisation. This makes them rely on outside institutions rather than on their own people.

### **Conclusion**

Some general conclusions can be drawn from comparisons between SSC, an organic group, and FC, a mandated group. Participation in SSC is strong since most of the members are well aware of their empowerment from being part of this group. And as very little money is available within this group, there is no competition for individual benefits. The mandated group, FC, is usually established by outsiders namely NGOs and the government. Some advantages are seen as available from this

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