

Traditional Forms of Social Capital in Cambodia and Their Linkage with Local Development Processes

Arnaldo Pellini describes the main characteristics of traditional pagoda associations in rural areas and their potential to play an active role in local governance and uses social capital theory to assess the associations that have developed in the Botum pagoda, in Kampong Thom province.*

Participation and community are terms that have been part of development vocabulary since the 1960s. The Royal Government of Cambodia is implementing institutional reforms that recognise participation as one of the main objectives. However, participation is often limited in Cambodia due to the hierarchical character of the society and the destruction to trust and social relations caused by the war and Khmer Rouge regime (Ovesen et al 1996). As a result, development initiatives at village level during the last ten years have focused on the creation of village level committees and formal groups without paying sufficient attention to traditional forms of community organisations that have survived the years of conflict.

A growing body of literature (e.g. Krishnamurthy 1999; Kim 2001; Ledgerwood and Vijghen 2002) has recently focused on social interaction and community dynamics and suggest that social capital in Cambodia was damaged, but not destroyed by the war and Khmer Rouge regime. It is around traditional forms of community mobilisation that development projects and local government initiatives can establish partnerships to achieve more sustainable community based development. This article is a sequel of an article that appeared earlier in the Cambodian Development Review (Pellini 2004) that described the main characteristics of traditional pagoda associations in rural areas and their potential to play an active role in local governance. This article focuses more on social capital theory to assess the case of the associations that have developed in the Botum pagoda, in Kampong Thom province.

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Elements of Social Capital in Cambodia

Development theories in the 1950s put a strong emphasis on economic growth. However by the mid 1950s, Solow¹ introduced *technology* as a missing variable in economic growth models. Singer (1961) introduced an additional element: the *capacity* of producing wealth. Schultz (1963) defined it *human capital* and described how knowledge and education contributed to achieve higher economic growth rates. In the late 1980s the concept of *social capital* was coined to describe the positive effect for development and democratisation of the interaction and exchange between individuals, voluntary groups and often institutions (Putnam 1993). In this section I will present some elements that characterise social capital in Cambodia.

Society

Social capital has been defined by Putnam (1993: 36) as “the features of social organisations, such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit”. According to Krishna (2000), Putnam’s definition focuses on the horizontal dimension of social capital, the one constituted by shared values, norms and beliefs. Krishna defines this as *relational social capital*. But social capital has also a vertical dimension characterised by hierarchical and unequal distribution of power. Krishna defines this second dimension as *institutional social capital*. It is important to note that these two dimensions are interlinked and, as pointed out by Uphoff (2000), *relational social capital* predisposes the individuals for collective action, while *institutional social capital* creates the necessary conditions and spaces that facilitate it.

Today’s Cambodian society is characterised by loose vertical linkages between heterogeneous groups and strong links between members at the same social level. This has created elements of exclusion in the society and has made social mobility, based on merits and skills, extremely difficult. In addition, the traditionalism that permeates the Cambodian society is reflected in a general discouragement to try anything new and in the belief that things have to be done in the way they have always been done (Chandler 1998; O’Leary and Meas 2001). According to Gyallay-Pap (2004: 35), this limited solidarity is a consequence of the French *mission civilisatrice*. While in the pre-colonial period, villages and settlements were highly decentralised and life was based on “shared cultural symbolism, religious and moral norms, and communal activities”. The colonisation by a centralised administration and the monetised economy have emphasised individualism and have reduced the sense of solidarity among individuals.

Trust is considered the central element of social capital. Uphoff (2000: 227) defines it as “the essential glue for society”. Trust depends on the availability of information as well as the existence of formal and informal rules that reinforce expectations between individuals. Formal rules relate to the judicial systems and the functioning of public institutions. Informal rules are linked to the reward that comes with trustworthy behavior and the social sanctions such as shame to those

who violate these norms (Pye 1999). Due to the war and the Khmer Rouge regime, trust is considered a missing element in Cambodian society (UNICEF 1996). The Khmer Rouge regime systematically undermined traditional social values such as family and religion but I argue that trust has not been completely shattered and has survived through traditional forms of collective actions.

Religion and pagodas as spaces for participation
Religious precepts such as trust and networking are considered by Putnam as an important source of social capital. However religion can also play a dual role. Theravada Buddhism in Cambodia, for example, on the one hand stresses the principle of karma (*action*) which justifies the present individual differences and the social hierarchy (Coletta and Cullen 2000). On the other hand, pagodas represent the actual centre of communal life and community initiatives (Aschmoneit 1996). A pagoda is in fact normally linked to six - eight villages and it is in the pagoda and not in the individual villages where most community meetings take place. The *Pagoda Committee*, a social and non-political administrative institution formed by elected or appointed *achars* (laymen) from the nearby villages is formed to see to the needs of the monks and novices, maintain the pagoda buildings, and organise ceremonies. *Achars* enjoy the trust of the community and have a leadership role (Aschmoneit *et al.* 1995). When the Pagoda Committee starts a specific community development activity, an ad hoc *Pagoda Association* is created with an *Association Committee* elected to manage its activities. The initial financial capital of this association is created through cash contributions during religious ceremonies. Subsequently, the payment of interest to the association on loans to others becomes the main source of income. At the end of the year, the Association Committee meets to decide the contribution to local development initiatives.

The Associations of Botum Pagoda

Botum pagoda is located in the village of Botum Lech in Kampong Thom province.² The pagoda of Botum has six supporting villages.³ The origin of community development activities of the Pagoda of Botum goes back to 1952 when the abbot of that time, Venerable Theng Gna, and twelve *achars* set up a Cash Association. In 1959 the Cash Association had sufficient capital to support the construction of a primary school near the pagoda compound. In 1972, when the village of Botum Lech came under Khmer Rouge control, the association had to suspend its activities. The *achars* of Botum Pagoda took the important documents and statues and hid them in sealed bamboo sticks that they buried under their houses. They dug them out only after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, when Theng Gna went back to Botum Pagoda as *achar*. During the 1980s it proved difficult to restart the association because the government decided to establish solidarity groups (*krom samaki*) in charge of community activities and reconstruction in every village. People had no money so that payments were often done with rice. But Theng Gna

and the other *achars* resumed the Cash Association at the end of 1988, while the School Association of Botum Pagoda was officially inaugurated in January 1989. A second School Association linked to the pagoda of Botum, was created in the nearby village of Kantong Rong in January 1992. External support to the associations has been provided by GTZ⁴ since 1995 and has taken the form of training on management, administration, and, today, on local governance.

Discussion

Three main themes appear from the experience of Botum pagoda: the importance of leadership for collective action, strong relational social capital and horizontal links in the community, and weak institutional social capital and vertical links between community and authorities.

Leadership

The leadership of Venerable Theng Gna has been the driving force behind the establishment of associations in the pagoda of Botum and the nearby villages. He is remembered as “a strong leader who used to visit villagers, enquire about their needs, and try to find ways to help them with small credits from the cash association” (personal interview 1). This suggests that the respect and trust that villagers feel for monks and *achars* is linked not only to their leadership position but also to their activism in the community and the ability to mobilise local contributions. The authority of *achars* is rarely questioned and they tend to keep their positions and responsibilities for a long time. Elections of the association’s committees, for example, are held sporadically as in the case of the School Association of Botum where they took place only twice. The inherent risk is that the leadership’s perception of the importance of transparency and accountability towards the association’s members, is lower. Moreover *achars* are more likely to receive training and education, thus accumulating knowledge and strengthening further their leadership. Aschmoneit (1996), however, has noted that *achars* are normally careful not to threaten the trust and consensus accumulated in the community with unpopular decisions.

Strong relational social capital

Rural areas in Cambodia have traditionally been distant from the central authority of Phnom Penh. This has provided the conditions for the creation of patron-client relationships at the local level as well as indigenous coping systems that helped individuals during periods of crisis.⁵ These mechanisms were shattered by the war and the Khmer Rouge regime but they were not destroyed (Coletta and Cullen 2000). Extended family networks were the main coping mechanism during the Khmer Rouge regime while pagodas have represented important points of reference for community action after the Khmer Rouge period. Solidarity underlines the credit activities of pagoda associations and the School Association of Botum Pagoda, for example, has tried in recent years to provide more loans to the poorest (*neak kro*). Religion also motivates

participation. "Villagers make contributions because they believe in Buddhism and that by doing something good they will gain merits" (personal interview 2). Association's members seem to feel a close connection with groups and institutions that are directly linked to them, like Pacoco.⁶ This suggests the strength of relational social capital and of the linkages based on solidarity, respect for leadership and trust that are described by Putnam (1993).

Weak institutional social capital

"We do not trust the teacher, the association member trust more Pacoco and the committee members" (personal interview 1). This sentence describes the mistrust that divides citizens and government representatives. The gap is particularly large in rural areas due to the traditional isolation in which these areas have been as well as the damage produced by the Khmer Rouge to the idea of government and state. In the case of Botum, the dialogue between teacher and School Association members is limited and does not go beyond the issue of financial contributions. The main reason for tension between association and teacher seems to be the transparency in the use of funds: "the use of local contributions is normally monitored by the teacher and the association's members. Last year [2004] the teacher requested support to buy material to build a fence around the school, but until today no fence has been built. Therefore we will now involve the Commune chief to ask the teacher to clarify about the use of the money we provided" (personal interview 1). A promising link with the Commune Council is starting to emerge but there aren't any links between association and district or provincial authorities. This may be due to the pressure on provincial and district education offices to promote participation by setting up ad hoc committees and the reluctance by association's members to take part in public meetings unless they have received an official invitation.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that pagoda associations represent a traditional channel for community action. These associations represent indigenous forms of social capital that "are not only a part of Cambodian civil society, but perhaps its largest and most solid" (Gyallay-Pap 2004: 36). The case of the pagoda of Botum shows the positive side as well as the limitations of relationships between community, public institutions and pagoda. We have seen that trust and religious norms characterize the relational social capital between villagers and pagoda while the vertical links with institutions are still weak. Equitable and democratic development in Cambodia requires a balance between the two dimensions of social capital. Strong horizontal links based on trust at the grassroots level are important and necessary as they have the potential to mobilise resources and organise collective action. At the same time stronger vertical links between civil society and government can help to strengthen public institutions and the development process. To achieve this, there is

the need for a change in attitudes. Members of traditional associations may start a dialogue with local authorities by linking, for example, with Commune Councils and discussing needs as well as their contributions to local development. Government institutions, on the other hand, will have to help to create the conditions for the emergence of spaces of participation where dialogue results in a greater citizens' involvement in decision making and development processes. The example presented in this paper suggests that, at the local level, the potential is present.

Endnotes

1. See Arndt, Heinz W. (1987). *Economic Development. The History of an Idea*, Chicago University Press, London.
2. Rong Reung commune, Stoung district
3. Botum Kaeut, Botum Lech, Kantong Rong, Prum Srei, Bos Ta Saum and Kantaueb
4. Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit – German Technical Cooperation Agency.
5. For more details see Scott, James C., 1972; "Patron-Client Politics and Political Change in Southeast Asia," in *The American Political Science Review*, 66: 91-113.
6. As the number of credit associations, because of GTZ support, grew rapidly in the district of Stoung, in 1997 it was decided to elect a district level Pagoda Coordination Committee (Pacoco) to represent pagoda associations with external donors and line agencies.

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Decentralisation...

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group, thus making it popular with other agencies and people who want to extract benefits from it. The fact that it is mostly externally driven, insufficiently empowered and without clear responsibility makes it difficult to attract and sustain people's participation. These are the main factors causing loss of trust and support.

SSC and FC have little in common concerning the concepts of participation and sustainability. To compare the case of the two groups within the concept networking between local groups is the backbone to understanding social capital. Local community groups are willing and are able to talk with the local government regarding policy issues and decision-making. This clearly leads to mutual benefit with both local community and local government. Nevertheless, social interaction frequently occurs only informally with a strong individualistic interest. Commune councillors and many officials complain that it is hard to promote awareness among people about commitment to the community because they perceive it as common task (*ro-bos roum*). But everyone is very keen to gain benefit for her/his own individual interest. Another prevailing sentiment is weak inter-institutional collaboration (bridging social capital). For most Cambodians, contact with representatives of the state at any level, except on the basis of kinship and friendship relations, is perceived as threatening and to be avoided if possible (Hughes 2005). This is consistent with the findings of this study on rural society in Cambodia. Local villagers do know exactly that lack of this interaction or engagement with the state leaves them powerless. But they are still very reluctant to establish this line of interaction with authorities. Nevertheless, SSC may be an exception. Both CCs and parents are very committed to improving SSC.

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