Decentralization at Commune/Sangkat Level in Cambodia

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Abstract

This study aims at examining the progress of decentralization efforts in Cambodia, as well as at describing critical internal and external factors that facilitated and/or obstructed the implementation of decentralization plans at the commune level. Specifically, it is designed to identify and review the policies and programs of the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) in terms of administrative, political and fiscal decentralization, to determine the administrative capability of the communes to implement the decentralization policies and programs of the RGC, to identify the effects of decentralization process on governance at the commune level, to pinpoint the factors affecting the implementation of decentralization programs in the communes, to formulate recommendations to enhance or improve decentralization based on the study's findings. Despite significant progress, decentralization efforts have been weighed down by several constraints, including lack of capability and technical competence of human resources in the commune, limited understanding of the concept of decentralization and its corresponding processes, lack of systems in program implementation, limited participation of villagers in major decision-making processes, and lack of flexibility in program generation and implementation due to a tendency of abiding by the law and regulation. Key recommendations are to strengthen the Commune Council and improve their ability to respond to work demands, to build capacity of CC members, to ensure political and funding support, to increase the active participation of people, especially women and marginalized groups, in program generation and implementation, and to set up a monitoring sub-committee for Effective and efficient program implementation

Keywords: **Cambodia/Decentralization/Commune Development Planning**

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Introduction

Background of the Study

In building the foundation for good governance, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) adopted in February 2001 the Governance Action Plan (GAP), a public administration reform program that sought to promote decentralisation and deconcentration as instruments to further democratize the country. The reform agenda covered improvements to the legal system, public finance reforms, the enhancement of security forces and the comprehensive reform of public administration, with the latter including decentralisation of the state administrative structure and the improvement of social services delivery of important social services.To achieve these goals, two important complementary landmark laws were passed: the Law on the Election of Communes/Sangkat Councilsand the Law on the Administration and Management of Commune/Sangkat (LAMC).

The LAMC provided a comprehensive framework for the decentralisation program of RGC, calls for the creation of Sangkats (communes) as commune legal entities, defines the administrative structure of the commune, and sets the legal basis for the establishment of the Commune Fund. In addition, it calls for the creation of the inter-ministerial policy formulation and coordination body that would monitor progress under decentralisation, among others. Despite the law, the implementation of the reform largely depends on the existing commune capability, institutional efficiency and effectiveness, and the technical competence and quality of commune human resources. In addition, RGC did not start on a clean slate as the lessons from the donor-driven Seila Program on decentralization had helped the government formulate its own programs and strategies up to the provincial and commune levels.

Capacity building of communes, capacity level of the Commune Development Committees (CDCs) for decentralized planning, and factors affecting CDC capacity level were studied by Seneh Siv (2002). Findings included: 1) all types of capacity building programs (CBPs) were highly accessible and highly attended, 2) CDCs attained a good level of performance in decentralized planning and sufficient understanding on their roles and responsibilities, 3) factors influencing capacity level included incentives and types of CBPs given, 4) critical capacity areas needed were in commune administration, planning and financing, and 5) the Seila Program was effective and successful.

Min Muny (2003) evaluated three revenue-source options for local governments in Cambodia. These are: 1) own-source revenues, 2) revenues collected and redistributed by provincial and municipal governments to communes (or "*Sangkat*"), and 3) the status-quo model (inter-governmental transfer – the commune/ *Sangkat*fund). Muny used three criteria for evaluation, namely: political viability, economic stability or fiscal consequences, and administrative operability.Own-source revenues come in the form of administrative fees, service charges, local contributions, business levies which are in legality informal. The only formal ones are civic registration fees which vary among communes, with some charging more than the official rates. Formalizing the payments is suggested.Revenues from provincial/municipal governments for communesconsist of self-obligatory and transfer revenues from the central government. There are current weaknesses because of little coordination between collection bodies and local authorities resulting in tax exemptions and lower estimates of provincial/municipal businesses.Intergovernmental transfer to the commune/*Sangkat* fundhas been affected by delays, while the draft allocation plan still has to be reviewed and adopted. Only 25% of the 2003 commune development component funds have been transferred. Also, the transfer system has not been designed to encourage performance by rewarding communes that perform well.

As pointed out by Chia, C., Ho, P., et al. (2003),there exist experiences and challenges in the process of decentralization as regarding to commune planning and financial management: The communes do no long-term planning except their one-year development and investment plan; needs and priorities identification is not well understood by commune and village representatives as throughout the past 5 years the focus has unremittingly been on infrastructure projects; no clear division of responsibility for service delivery exists among different tiers of government; there is no clear criteria for selection of priority projects--some places use majority vote whilst others use different methods; and cooperation and coordination between commune, line department, provincial office and political party in project development and activities is weak. Possible solutions include 1) the issues around deconcentration, 2) potential conflict in relationships between a province and its staff and the commune, 3) in -depth analysis of the relationship between clerk and commune councilors, 4) a study of local service revenues with emphasis on the structure of local taxation, 5) and an assessment of the management and technical expertise of the TSS team in fulfilling their duties for the commune.

The National Committee to Support Communes (NCSC) (2004) reviews the RGC's reforms for decentralisation, which started in 2002. On the basis of data gathered from 24 districts, 72 communes, and 216 villages located in six provinces and two municipalities, the review highlights both achievements and constraints in the following 10 decentralisation reform themes, including Overall policy and strategy, Regulatory framework, Fiscal decentralisation, Decentralisation policy coordination, Planning process, Capacity building and support systems, Accountability and transparency, Equity issues: women and children, Decentralisation and poverty reduction, and Decentralisation and the environment.

Challenges in achieving the aims of government decentralisation reform in the context of the present political and institutional environment (CDRI, 2003) are several. Oneis that accountabilities are upward to the political party, not to the electorate. Commune councilors are accountable to the central party. A pluralist democracy cannot be achieved with village chiefs and clerks accountable to the central government and commune councilors accountable to the central parties. Indeed, there is continuous reliance on support from higher levels, with lower levels of government waiting for the national level to provide solutions and hesitating to resolve conflicts and issues. The upward reporting culture needs to be replaced by a culture of inter-communal support and collaboration. Moreover, support functions are placed on a vertical scale producing previous dependencies on higher levels.

In other words, the government can only come closer to the people if the bureaucracy at the commune level is accountable to the elected representatives and the current controlling function of the district (sub-national government level above the commune) is reduced or changed. There is a lack of inter-communal collaboration, placing limits on co-production between the private sector, civil society and the commune council. To strengthen commune-NGO partnership, existing commune structures must be enhanced. But NGOs often bypass local governments by directly communicating with the province/district. This creates conflicts between NGOs and politicians, who are also divided on the issue of party funding because politicians often present them as party gifts. In addition, clerks and councilors face a heavy workload, causing some to refrain from council work that has been multiplying as more devolved functions/responsibilities come in. Thus, there is a need for salary supplements to run the

support system. Lastly, capacity building seminars do not yet match local conditions and the capacity of councilors. Communal planning is too comprehensive and extensive, raising high expectations.
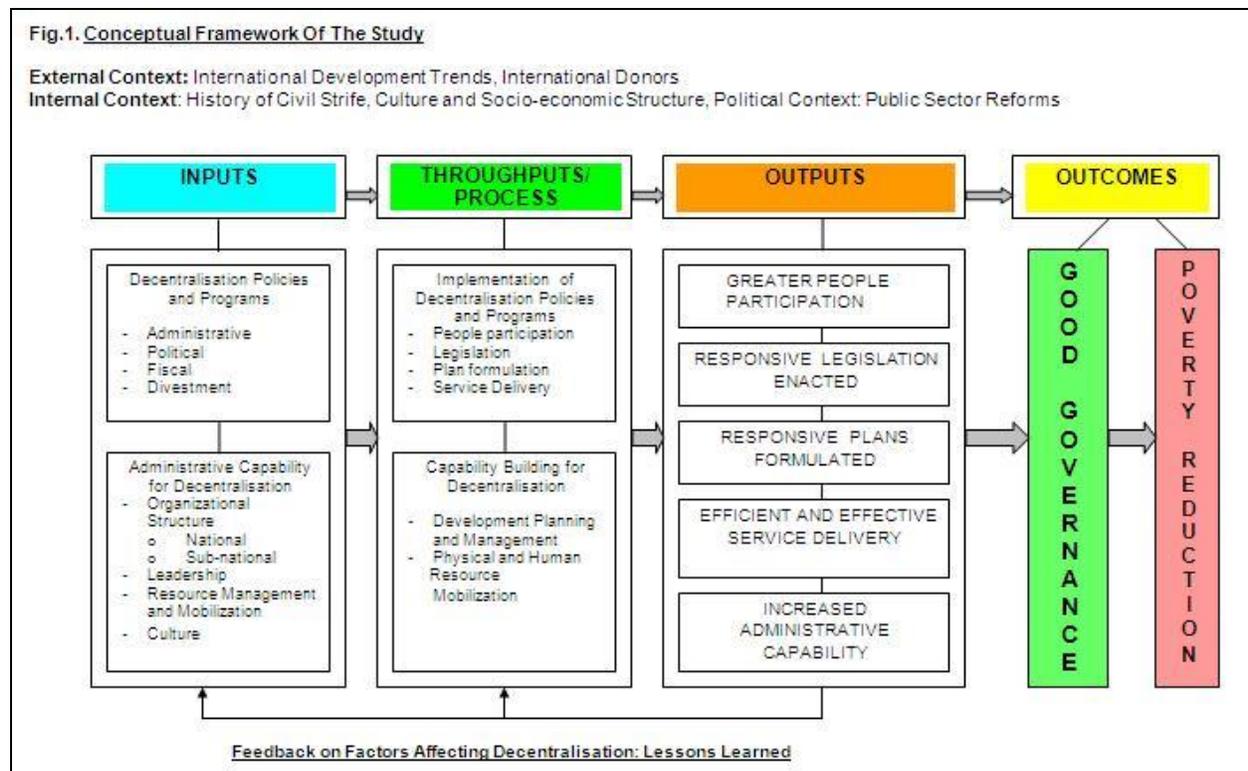
Also, there seems to be inadequate understanding about the concept of decentralisation within all ranks of government. The current policy on decentralisation likewise lacks a clear statement on the devolution of functions. For instance, while the communes are encouraged to chart their own development agenda, they are also being tasked to tailor-fit their development plans to the national development plan.

Objectives of the Study

Because of the above hurdles in the implementation of decentralisation plans and the lack of independent assessment of the project, this study aims to document and assess the progress of decentralisation efforts in Cambodia, specifically at the commune level by undertaking an in-depth review of both the decentralisation policies and programs and existing governance capabilities amid the decentralisation process currently taking place. The study also aims to describe the critical factors that have thus far influenced the implementation of decentralisation and to determine whether these have led to the desired outputs and outcomes that dovetail in good governance. Specifically, the study looks into the extent of the implementation of RGC's program in respect to the inputs, process, and outputs.

Conceptual Framework

Fig.1. Conceptual Framework Of The Study

External Context: International Development Trends, International Donors
Internal Context: History of Civil Strife, Culture and Socio-economic Structure, Political Context: Public Sector Reforms

The study focuses on the implementation of decentralisation at the commune level by examiningpeople participation, legislation at the commune level, plan formulation and service delivery at three levels: input, process, and output.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a mixed design approach incorporating both desk review and survey (qualitative and quantitative) as sources of secondary and primary data needed for the study.

Secondary data was gathered from statistical centers and government agencies that hold information on the decentralisation policies, programs and projects of Cambodia and the Philippines. These consist of legislation, policies and programs, maps, statistics, reports, articles and other official documents pertaining to decentralisation. Examples of these are reports issued by the National Council for Commune Support (NCCS), the Department of Local Administration (DOLA) of the Ministry of

Interior, the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Cambodia, the Commune Council Support Program (CCSP) of the Asia Foundation, speeches of government officials, and other similar references from other countries. The author also accessed several websites on local governance and decentralisation.

Primary data was gathered through the use of survey instruments for interviewwith key informants (Part 1) and constituents (Part 2) in Takeo, Kandal, Kampong Chhnang and Battambang provinces. Details of the instruments can be found in Chhorng's dissertation (2011).

Site selection is based on SEILA program history of decentralization that the selection would allow for comparison. Battambang was one of the five experimented provinces on decentralization since 1996, while the other three provinces are among those where SEILA decentralisation program started in 2002. In these provinces, 29 villages from 8 communes from 6 districts were selected, from which household heads were randomly selected as primary respondents and the commune council members of these 8 communes were all selected.This paper, however, presents only the results obtained from the KI interview only.

Findings

Profile of the Commune Council (CC)

The CC is mainly composed of community members whose ages ranged from 30 to 69. Majority of the CC (47.6%, or 30 of the 63 respondents) belong to the 50-59 age bracket. The oldest members (12, or 19% of respondents) belonged to the 60-69 age bracket. A total of 30.2% (19) were between the ages of 40-49 years; the youngest (2, or 3.2%) belonged to the 30-39 age bracket. Male CC members outnumbered females, at 55 (87.3%) and 8 (12.7%) respectively. The majority of the commune council members have low educational attainment. Almost half of the respondents (31 or 49.2%) either had no education at all (3 members) or attended only primary school (28 members); while 22.2% had some lower secondary education and 27% reached the upper secondary level. Only one commune council member held a Bachelor's Degree.

Table 1 Profile of the commune council respondents

Age Group	Number (n=63)	Percent
30-39	2	3.2
40-49	19	30.2
50-59	30	47.6
60-69	12	19.0
Gender		
Male	55	87.3
Female	8	12.7
Education		
No education	3	4.8
Primary School	28	44.4
Lower Secondary School	14	22.2
Upper Secondary School	17	27.0
Bachelor Degree	1	1.6
CC Positions		
CC Chiefs	4	6.3
1st and 2nd CC Deputies	9	14.3
CC Members	50	79.4

Decentralization Inputs

Two indicators are of focus here: roles and responsibilities of CC members and commune resources. Each commune council member may have multiple activities/responsibilities.Major responsibilities include managing, overseeing, or planning activities in connection to social affairs (36.5%), development issues (31.7%), planning (28.6%), coordination among people (22.2%), listing of economic activities (20.6%), security (19%), and environmental issues (17.5%). Nevertheless, many

respondents spent their most time on activities related to planning (49%), followed by solving problems (16%), and security, monitoring project implementation, and assisting CC chiefs (about 12% each).

Respondents were asked to rank several choices related to the number of personnel, as against the volume of work that had to be done in the Commune. Twenty-six (26, or 41.3%) said the number of personnel matched the volume of work that had to be done; 23 (36.5%) said there was more work than the present personnel component could handle. The remaining 14 respondents (22.2%) said the number of personnel can support the load of work in the commune, but workload distribution will vary. Some have to do more work but if properly delegated, the work can still be done in time. Regarding the skills of personnel, more than one-third of the respondents (25, or 39.7%) agreed that personnel have some of the required skills but output is not affected. Another 20 (31.7%) said the personnel can learn the skills needed in their jobs. Only 16 respondents (25.4%) said there was a matching of personnel and skills required. The remaining two respondents (2, or 3.2%) said the personnel on board did not have the skills needed for their jobs in the Commune.

Table 2 Multi-responsibilities of the commune council members

	Number	Percent
On activities only you can do (Basic functions)		
Social affairs	23	36.5
Development economics, living standard	20	31.7
Planning	18	28.6
Coordinate between people	14	22.2
Economic list	13	20.6
Security	12	19.0
Environment, Natural resource	11	17.5
Evaluate the project	8	12.7
Administrative Affairs	7	11.1
Parentless	5	7.9

	Number	Percent
Public affairs	5	7.9
Procurement	4	6.3
Information	4	6.3
Land management	3	4.8
Finance	2	3.2
Incentive	2	3.2
Register birth certificate	2	3.2
Religion	2	3.2
Others	6	9.5

Majority of the respondents (60, or 96.8%) said they needed trainings to achieve effectiveness and efficiency in performing their work in the Commune. Those who said they needed training were further asked to identify areas for training. The need for training in administrative work was ranked the highest, with 34 respondents (55.7%), followed by financial training (28, or 45.2%), and technical training (37.1%). Other areas of training of less common based on the responses are environmental management (18.5%), problem-solving techniques (13.2%), and gender training (7.3%).

Table 3 Demand for and areas of training for effectiveness and efficiency of work

Response	n	Percent
Yes	60	96.8
No	2	3.2
Admin. Training *(n=61)*	34	55.7
Financial training *(n=62)*	28	45.2
Technical training *(n=62)*	23	37.1
Any training course *(n=60)*	13	21.7
Environment *(n=54)*	10	18.5

Response	n	Percent
Solving problem *(n=38)*	5	13.2
Gender *(n=55)*	4	7.3
Others *(n=56)*	4	7.1

Decentralization Process

Development Planning and Management consists of the **quantity** and **quality** of planning done at the Commune and how resource is managed. This process is a tool used by the administration to direct the Commune towards its expressed development goals and objectives. Regarding planning the commune development plans (CDP), the majority (79.4%) said that the mandate to formulate the CDP lay with the Commune Council, while 33 respondents (52.4%) said this mandate was with the Chief of the Commune alone. Another 17 respondents (27%) attributed this to the CCC; another 9 (14.3%) to the KPC.

Planning was often done by the following procedures: Planning (46.0%), followed by meeting the people to get information (38.1%), collecting data from the village (28.6%), and setting up of procedures for problem solving (7.9%). Actors in the planning process are multiple, primarily by CC members (93.7%), people (77.8%), village chiefs (55.6%), donors (49.2%), the coordinator (29, or 46%), and CC jointly with the people (15.9%).

The process of prioritizing projects was also asked. The following steps were identified: collecting data on people's needs (54%); collecting general information (22.2%); conducting meetings (22.2%), discussions within the Commune (14.3%), reviewing the Commune structure (7.9%), planning (7.9%), educating the people on this (3.2%), and announcing the plan to the people (1.6%). In addition, the decision-making in project prioritization was general done by CC members (63.5%), followed by the KPF (50.8%), and by people at meeting (38.1%).

Table 4 Project prioritization process

Response	n	Percent
Collecting the people's needs	34	54.0
Collecting general information	14	22.2
Conducting meeting	14	22.2
Discussing between communes	9	14.3
Reviewing commune structure	5	7.9
Planning	5	7.9
Educating	2	3.2
Announcing the planning to people	1	1.6

Not all prioritized CDPs are forwarded to the national government for funding. They are undergone further screening. According to the respondents, some project are analyzed and selectedreflecting the actual demands of people in the commune. Most of the CDPs are sent to POLA and district government. Nearly one half of the respondents who provided answers (28 out of 57), said that the submitted project proposals needed revised after being sent for funding. Common issues in revising the proposals are related to the proposed budgets and project areas.

Despite the project revision, not all submitted projects get funded. One-third of the respondents (31.7%) said that relatively few (around 10%-30%) projects got approved. Nineteen respondents (30.2%) said project approval heavily depended on the budget allotted by the government to the Commune. Only 9 respondents (14.3%) gave an approval rate of 50%, while only 8 respondents (12.7%) said that majority of the project proposals submitted for funding got approved (approval rate of about 75%)(Table below). Nevertheless, the majority of the respondents (52, or 82.5%) believed that the approved projects were representative of the peoples needs.

Table 5 Percentage distribution of responses on chance of getting projects funded

Responses by chance of getting fund	n	Percent
10-30% of the projects submitted to the national government get approved	20	31.7
Approval of projects depends on the allotted budget by the government.	19	30.2
About 50% of submitted projects gets approved	9	14.3
Majority of submitted projects gets approved (75%)	8	12.7

Questions were asked to identify the process of mobilizing commune people into the formulation of specific laws that would affect their commune lives. About 41.8% of respondents (23 of 55 respondents proving answers) said that peoples were consulted prior to the passage of laws in the Commune. Common processes of consultation were community meeting and distribution of drafted laws to the commune. As for the meeting participation of people, only 8 out of 23 respondents said that they had gathered people to attend public hearings and consultation, while 7 out of 23 respondents reported receiving inputs from participating people. On average, there was about 40% of commune people participating.

Regarding the mechanisms for engaging people, twenty-eight respondents (44.4%) said there were mechanisms for people's participation that had been set in place. These included the use of suggestion boxes, encouraging people to join in the discussions, giving incentives for them to participate. Twenty-four respondents (38.1%) however said that no such mechanisms were in place. In fact these activities were not announced, and there were in fact no projects identified for the Communes. One participant went on to say that peoples participation was not a result of Commune encouragement, but that people's participation was entirely voluntary.

Table 6 Existing mechanisms that encourage people's participation

Response	n	Percent
Yes	28	44.4
No	24	38.1
If Yes		
Suggestion box (n=30)	18	28.6
People should join (n=24)	9	14.3
Give presents (n=10)	3	4.8
Implement after meeting (n=28)	2	3.2
Box letter (n=19)	2	3.2
If No		
Don't announce to people (n=17)	2	3.2
People don't join (n=15)	1	1.6
No project for commune (n=12)	1	1.6
People volunteer (n=2)	1	1.6

Decentralization Output/Results

This section addresses the desired results of decentralization in the communes. Specifically, it looks at the issues of increasing participation of people, number of laws passed, number of approved projects, and improved services delivery of the communes.

The result of the survey suggests that people's participation has been improved since decentralization. For example, the majority of the respondents (46, at 73%) said people's participation increased by 50% since decentralisation. Fourteen (22.2%) said improvement was only by 25%. Only two respondents (3.2%) said that a peoples participation radically improved by 100% following decentralisation. Reasons for improved participation include people's motives for improving their lives, people's understanding of their rights for participation, contribution of other people, and access to

information through village chiefs and media. Nevertheless, some people did not actively participate due to their business, lack of confidence, and lack of access to information.

Table 7 Rating of and reasons for people's participation since decentralisation

Response	n	Percent
People participation has more than improved (increase 50%)	46	73.0
People participation has slightly improved (increase of 25%)	14	22.2
People participation has radically improved (increase of 100%)	2	3.2
Positive Response		
They want to improve their living standard (n=55)	14	22.2
People think they have rights (n=50)	13	20.6
Contribution from people (n=34)	5	7.9
Chief of village come to visit and tell people (n=40)	4	6.3
Announcement (n=36)	3	4.8
Negative Response		
People busy (n=24)	8	12.7
Lack of information for people (n=35)	5	7.9
No confidence (n=20)	5	7.9

Projects implemented in these communes are primarily related to roads (45.1%) andsafe water (45.2%). The heart of decentralization is in the delivery of basic services of the government brought closer to the people. According to the respondents, assess the delivered basic services by the Commune during the past four years have been improved (55, or 87.3%). It is desirable that decentralization answers to the call of delivering adequate, responsive, efficient and effective services to the people. These concepts can be measured using some qualifiers outlined below.

Respondents were asked if they believed that their communes were facing up to their mandated task to deliver the basic services to people in their jurisdiction. The result shows that 40 out

of 60 respondents (66.7%) were aware that theircommunes had been implementing its LAMC mandate. Reasons for this are that it is provided for by law, that the people cannot solve some problems on their own.Twelve respondents (20%) were vague on the matter, citing such problems as lack of budget, low living standards, and that the Commune's duty to help the people had been set by the LAMC.Eight other respondents (13.3%) said that the Commune was not performing its LAMC mandate, and that there was a limit to the activities that it can undertake for the people.

Table 8 Communes are up to their mandated task regarding basic services delivery

Responses	n	Percent
Yes	40	66.7
Somewhat	12	20.0
No	8	13.3
If Yes:		**% of respondents**
Law	23	57.5
Cannot solve some problem	11	27.5
Most of people response	9	22.5
If Somewhat:		**% of respondents**
Lack of budget affect the activities	5	41.7
Commune have duty set by LAMC	2	16.7
Some project can implement	2	16.7
Old view	1	8.3
Low living standard	1	8.3
If No:		**% of respondents**
Activities limit by LAMC	2	22.2
Satisfied to implement activities	2	22.2

Service delivery to people in need is only one side of decentralization process. The other side is people's access to delivered services. When asked if there are existing mechanisms for people to have easy access to services, 36 out of 53 respondents who provided answers said so, while the other 17 respondents reported the non-existence of such mechanisms. Many respondents referred to administrative laws as mechanisms for access to services (42.4%), followed by 24 hours services availability (30.3%), and visiting people (15.2%). Only one respondent mentioned about low cost health services at health centers.

As mentioned earlier, responsive services are those that are flexible for modification of procedures and rules according to the demands of the community, those that are matching with people's need, and those whose staff are able to provide services to people directly and quickly with willingness and competency.

Table below shows the ranking of services delivered to people as commune mandate and those identified by people as priority areas of need. According to the interviewee respondents, services related to administration, birth certificate, roads, pipes, health, and social issues are six services (by the ranking based on the number of responses obtained) delivered to the commune people as part of their mandate. According to the areas of priority identified by people in the commune, as perceived by the respondents, roads, pipes, and water canals are the top three; followed by bridges, environment, education, health, and social issues. Although there are overlapping areas in terms of services delivery and people's demand, services should include water canals, bridges, and environment. Nevertheless, the majority of the respondents (about 87%) indicated that these indentified areas with priority had been on the top of the list for funding and political support

Table 9 Areas of services delivery and areas of priority

Areas of Services	Areas of services delivery as mandated			Areas identified by people as priority		
	N	% of respondents	Ranking	N	% of respondents	Ranking
Administrative services	30	65.2	**1**	0	0.0	-
Birth certificate	24	52.2	**2**	0	0.0	-
Roads	22	47.8	**3**	53	93.0	**1**
Pipes	17	37.0	**4**	38	66.7	**2**
Health	13	28.3	**5**	4	7.0	**7**
Social problems	12	26.1	**6**	2	3.5	**8**
Education	4	8.7	**7**	7	12.3	**6**
Water canals	0	0.0	-	25	43.9	**3**
Bridges	0	0.0	-	8	14.0	**4**
Environment	0	0.0	-	8	14.0	**4**
N of answers	**122**	**-**	**-**	**145**	**-**	**-**
N of respondents	**46**	**100.0**		**57**	**100.0**	

A further question was asked whether the commune formulated their programs/projects based on the articulated need of people. Despite consultations on people's needs, the actual formulation plans was the sole discretion of the administration. This was expressed by 22 respondents (39.3%). Twenty-one respondents (37.5%) were in agreement that about 8 out of 10 plans were based on peoples needs, while 13 respondents said that only half of the plans were based on peoples needs and implementation of these were contingent on government planning, on the budget plan, and on peoples demands.

Regarding whether the formulated plans are flexible enough to allow for modification of rules and procedures in order to reflect people's demand and need, more than 50% of the respondents indicated so, while one fourths of the respondents indicated otherwise. About one fifths of the respondents said the plans sometimes were and sometimes were not flexible enough.

Multiple indicators are used to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of services delivery. One of them is whether the performance of services delivery is satisfactory, convenient, prioritized. About74% of the respondents (43) agreed that their communes have emphasized organizational standards and their performance are satisfactory, while only 26% (15) said that this was not so.Availability of services to the client at a time convenient for them was cited by 50 respondents (86.2%), in contrast to the 8 respondents (13.8%) who said was service delivery was contingent on the availability of officials. Responses differed slightly on whether services delivery was prioritized over integrated services (29, or 52%), as an almost similar number of respondents (27, or 48%) said specialization of tasks was prioritized over service delivery.

Table 10 Performance of service delivery

Satisfaction	n	Percent
A. Satisfactory performance (n = 58)		
Commune's performance emphasize organizational standards and this is being met satisfactorily	43	74.1
Commune's performance emphasize organizational standards and this is yet to be met satisfactorily	15	25.9
B. Services are made available at convenient time of: (n=58)		
Clients	50	86.2
Services delivery officials	8	13.8
C. Prioritized versus integrated services (n=56)		
Delivery of integrated services is given priority over specialization of tasks	29	51.8
Specialization of tasks is given priority with regards to the delivery of services	27	48.2

Two other indicators are encouraging people's participation in services delivery and time allowability for people to participate.All respondents (59) agreed that the Commune encouraged people participation in service delivery. This was facilitated by the good relations between the people and the Commune council, where people are allowed to express their ideas. The construction of roads have also benefited the people, and has allowed easier access to remote areas where their areas are located.

Conclusion

Twelve years after the experimental program for decentralization (Seila 1996) and seven years after the enactment of two landmark legislations - the Law on Commune and Management of Communes and the Law on Commune Elections – decentralization efforts of the Royal Government of Cambodia have been building extensively on the lessons learned through the CARERE/Seila programmes. Aimed at improving decision-making and implementation of development programs at the local level, lessons learned have been translated into a comprehensive reform. Looking at this point into the commune councils and the constituents, their perceptions and knowledge of decentralisation and its implementation, the CC performance and people's participation in the whole process, there is much left to be desired.

Decentralisation efforts have been weighed down by problems and constraints in regard to:

- the lack of capability and technical competence of human resources in the commune

- the commune government's lack of a full understanding of the concept of decentralisation and its corresponding processes

- lack of systems in program implementation

- the lackluster interest in the programs on the part of the people

- the lack of people participation in major decision-making processes

These observations have been recurring in the responses to questions and in the points raised during discussions initiated in this study and in the evaluation processes conducted at the commune and at the CC level.

At the level of the commune government, the CCs are generally aware of their roles and functions in the program and are inclined to be dutiful in the performance of the tasks at hand. Moreover, they have strong tendencies to be mechanical in doing what is in the list 'because it is required by the law.' Existing commune governance capabilities in response to the decentralization process currently in effect fall short of the requirements needed for decentralisation to take place effectively and efficiently. CC members have difficulty in going beyond their daily activities/tasks and the projects in sight, thus fail to direct their efforts towards the envisioned decentralisation scenario at the commune level.

This is compounded by an inadequate understanding of decentralisation projections and of what the CCs are more capable of doing at the next level, and further, what that next level is as far as decentralisation is concerned. Based on the CCs' comprehension of decentralisation thus far, implementation of decentralisation at the commune level is very loosely linked or tied to achieving the desired outputs and outcomes of poverty reduction. To most of the CCs, decentralisation is a set of tasks and duties that they must accomplish to live up to the expectations of the higher government structures.

Current decentralisation processes fail to provide concrete venues for people participation in charting out their own development agenda. The formulation of the CDP, the prioritization of projects, budget planning, and the passing of laws - venues for the people to voice their concerns - lay not on their hands but on the CC. Thus, the key aspect for enhancing efficiency of decentralisation - the voluntary participation of people in a process in which they are given a voice so that they may influence decisions affecting their lives – is not actively at work.

Participation, from most people's point of view, means basically to be present in meetings. But many commune meetings are, by and large lacking the dynamics and interaction that can draw out genuine enthusiasm and motivation from the people. People's seeming indifference to decentralization issues and how it affects their lives can be ascribed to their unawareness of the importance of their own contribution to development.

Suggestions

This paper provides the following recommendations for strengthening the Commune Council and improve ability to respond to demands of their work.

Perspectives setting.Conduct VMG-setting sessions that will facilitate understanding by the CCs and the constituents of their desired future and how they will contribute to achieving that vision.A stronger development perspective setting for CCs and constituents must be in focus to counter the emerging attitude of most of the CCs and the people towards the local government and the projects. At the same time, constant monitoring and sensitizing on the purpose of project implementation must be done to ensure people's participation as necessary preparations for obtaining their high commitment

Capability Building.Pursue continuous knowledge and technical training of CC members

- Conduct training needs assessment.
- Ensure CC participation in and contribution to the rethinking of the training plan/course design that accommodates the diversity of emerging training needs at the commune.
- Review training courses for the design of a cohesive/comprehensive training programme that matches the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed by the CCs.
- Explore horizontal peer learning concept to enhance shared learning across the communes; introduce into the training programme and in its methodology
- Conduct on-job trainings rather than in large groups

Political and funding support.As Commune Councils are meant to assume an important function in the promotion of local development and delivery of services, the Commune Law provides the regulatory framework within which Communes can operate and permits a wide range of development initiatives. However, the law does not give them either specific services delivery mandates or substantive fiscal powers in formulating commune development plans.

- Actively seek information/updates on, pursue contributing to the central government's elaboration on the framework which indicates clearly the service delivery roles that Communes can - or should – take on, and how such Commune roles relate to those of established or emerging other service providers like government agencies, NGOs, etc.

- Examine and identify own potential sources of revenue

- Conduct funds and project management properly and well; simplify systems and procedures

- Work towards people's engagement with and ownership of commune projects and programs.

- Actively support and practice planning from below that presents a good mix of projects reflecting local needs rather than partiality to infrastructure – a continuing project of the CDP

- Involve people in the implementation of the project/s; recognize importance of their taking part and providing assistance to the communes and contractors in preparing project sites

- Meetings as venues for people participation should place emphasis on development agenda and allow for an active exchange of ideas between/among the constituents and should not be fixated on technicalities.

- Establish/strengthen rapport and partnership with NGOs and civil society groups for the implementation of decentralization program.

- Enhance/Set up an effective PME/MIS system. This will improve record system, collection system of information, information flow, etc. which are attributes of a good PME/MIS that is needed in CC work.

- Conduct team building/SIR activities, interspersing these into the trainings and in the course of the performance of their work

- Set up a system for communication and public information to inform and update the people about commune activities

- Maximise/strengthen women participation and potential for leadership

- Place special emphasis on training of female councilors.

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