



## Case Story

### CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNE PLANNING IN CAMBODIA

#### 1. Background

NGOs in Cambodia play a major role in providing and supporting basic social services, often in remote areas and communities. They are present in every province and major sector in Cambodia. They are perceived as independent from government as they were formed when national administration was under UNTAC and after Cambodia's return to democracy in 1991 to 1993.

Pact Cambodia is a field office of Pact, a nonprofit corporation registered in the United States. Pact has projects in 46 countries in Asia, Eurasia, Africa and Latin America, with field offices in 26 countries. Pact arrived in Cambodia in 1991 just after the signing of the Paris Peace Accord with an initial objective of building the capacity of local organizations working with some of the neediest groups: the poor, women and war victims. Pact also encouraged the formation of new Cambodian-American organizations to provide needed services including rural enterprise development, community leadership, women's social and economic improvement, psychosocial counseling, and village maternal and child health.

Pact provided emerging Cambodian and Cambodian-American organizations with subgrants to run programs and cover basic operating expenses, supporting them with training and technical assistance to strengthen project and financial management skills. Today the Cambodian NGO sector numbers over 1,000 local organizations.

As local NGOs began to mature, Pact helped them to develop critical self-assessment skills to design program strategies, define long-term visions, and examine the impact of their programs on target populations. Pact also encouraged organizations to form networks and coalitions to incubate ideas and share lessons learned.



In addition, Pact was one of the first organizations to fund Buddhist NGO's, recognizing that they could play an important role in development. In 1997, when political unrest led to the proposed shut down of all direct U.S. assistance, Pact led a coalition effort that successfully lobbied the U.S. Congress to keep money flowing to local NGOs.

Pact continues to use its resources to fill strategic development gaps. Rather than directly implementing programs, Pact makes its contribution to Cambodia by strengthening and supporting local institutions run by and for Cambodians. This support has been expressed in a variety of services including assessment of local institutions' organizational and accounting capacities, technical consultations, financial support through subgrants and trainings, facilitating workshops for building capacity of staff members, organizing and facilitating working groups, program and sector assessments, program development, and managing programs involving numerous NGO partners.

## 2. CSO Action

In Cambodia, citizen engagement with government is limited. For a variety of cultural and historic reasons, public service is perceived as a gift grudgingly given rather than a right. Pact Cambodia's Local Administration and Reform Project (LAAR) assists civil society effectively to demand accountability and transparency from elected councils/government at the local level.

Working alongside local NGO partners, LAAR is engaged in a deliberate process in 356 communes to build mutual understanding, improve communication and increase information exchanged between citizen groups (Commune Mobilizing Committees) and their local government officials (commune councilors). LAAR helps citizens understand how to put good governance principles into action and helps commune councilors be more responsive to the needs of their communities.

## 3. Program Status

Ensuring active citizen participation during monthly local commune council meetings has required building relationships among many stakeholders. As a result of LAAR's work, citizens provide inputs into their Commune Investment and Development Plans. CMCs are beginning to develop the



confidence to review the status of local expenditures of budget plans.

On the supply side, commune council officials now regularly conduct public consultations with different community groups (a role they had previously rejected) for which they have received additional funds from the national government for outreach activities and post budgets are notice boards in several thousand villages.

According to our research, LAAR-trained commune councilors have greater commitment to citizen participation than non-LAAR areas. Similarly, CMC activists have increased confidence in tracking government performance. LAAR is currently assisting CMCs and the commune councils in joint design of a social development project. CMC members will play a strong role in monitoring the project's implementation.

#### 4. Challenges

The low rate of literacy and numeracy in rural areas is a major obstacle to increasing citizens' capacity to monitor the procurement process; low education levels plague local officials as well. Additionally, low rural incomes mean that CMC members struggle to meet their basic livelihood needs. Similarly, the large distances between villages and the relatively high cost of transportation often prevent true citizen participation in commune council monthly meetings.

Next steps will be to improve the financial literacy of CMCs as well as their understanding of and involvement in the procurement process and bidding, monitoring and evaluation of service provider outputs, and developing mechanisms that address complaints to improve local government's performance.

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