

Social accountability
perspectives and practices
in East Asia and the Pacific

CAMBODIA INDONESIA
MONGOLIA PHILIPPINES



Cambodia

Social
accountability
stocktaking
reports



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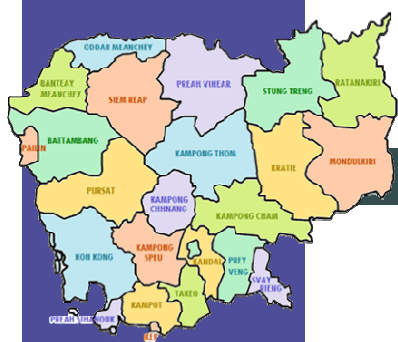
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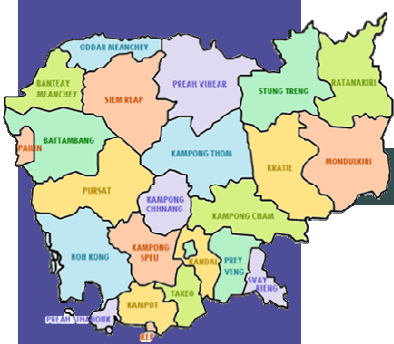
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ABBREVIATIONS & ACRONYMS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADI	Analyzing Development Issues Project
BFD	Buddhism for Development
CAS	Center for Advanced Study
CBO	Community-based organization
CC	Commune Council
CCC	Cooperation Committee for Cambodia
CCSP	Commune Council Support Project
CDRI	Cambodia Development Resource Institute
CEDAC	Cambodian Center for Study and Development in Agriculture
CMC	Community Management Course
CNGO	Cambodian Non-Governmental Organization
COMFREL	Committee for Free and Fair Election in Cambodia
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
CRR	Citizen Rating Report
CS	Civil Society
CSO	Civil Society Organization
D&D	Decentralization and Deconcentration
HE	His Excellency
IFC	International Finance Corporation
JICA	Japanese International Cooperation Agency
KID	Khmer Institute of Democracy
LNGO	Local Non-Government Organization
Mol	Ministry of Interior
NCDD	National Committee for Decentralization and Deconcentration
OL	Organic Law
PDV	Peace Development Volunteers
RFA	Radio Free Asia
RGC	Royal Government of Cambodia
SAc	Social Accountability
SME	Small and Medium Enterprises
TAF	The Asia Foundation
VOA	Voice of America
WB	World Bank



GLOSSARY OF KHMER TERMS

<i>Ak phibalkech laar</i>	Good Governance; refers to benevolent leadership characterized by transparency, responsibility, and absence of corruption. May also refer to the functional, responsive, and accountable administration of the state. This is a relatively new term that was first used in the 1990s.
<i>Bandaine</i>	Networking; refers to a system of interactions and relationships between groups and individuals. It can refer to individual networks or relationships. Networking happens through kinship and personal group interactions.
<i>Ka tortuol khos trov</i>	Responsibility; normally refers to individuals being responsible for their own conduct or assigned tasks.
<i>Ka tortuol khos prorkorb doy thor</i>	Moral responsibility; refers to leaders who are concerned with the welfare of and are treating the public with tolerance and fairness.
<i>Ka tuk chet/ smarmos trang</i>	Trust, honest; refers to a person who neither cheats nor lies, but instead acts with honor and respect. This is related to the moral responsibility of individuals.
<i>Kanak neiyak pheap</i>	Accountability; widely understood as responsibility or being able to explain.
<i>Kanak neiyak pheap sangkum</i>	Social accountability; refers to the moral responsibility of leaders to be transparent and responsive to the needs of the people.
<i>Kar tor sou mate</i>	Advocacy and expressing/voicing out ideas; literally means “to struggle for an idea”. This is a new term that is not widely understood outside the NGO community in Cambodia.
<i>Komlaing</i>	Force or strength or power.
<i>Ksea knaorn</i>	Patronage system; refers to the network of relationships between patron and client to promote personal interests. It refers to networking as well.
<i>Sangkhum</i>	Social or society.

THE EVOLVING MEANING OF SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN CAMBODIA

Cambodia has become a modern archetype of reconstruction (Ojendal, 2003) after experiencing massive social and political collapse due to violence and protracted conflict in the early 1970s and into the late 1990s. Some scholars even treat Cambodia as a “failed state” where society is disconcertingly sucked into a maelstrom of anomie (Paris, 2005).

Since its inception in the early 1990s, Cambodian democracy has struggled to survive like other unconsolidated democracies following the national elections of 1993, 1998, 2003, and 2008; and decentralization reforms that led to the commune elections in 2002 and 2007. With the broadening of democratic space and the stepping up of development efforts, it was inevitable for the state to “reconnect” with civil society to enhance its legitimacy. However, the result is some kind of “hybrid” regime characterized by the establishment of democratic institutions (i.e. regular elections and a liberal constitution) but nevertheless operating outside generally accepted democratic norms, values, and procedures (Ojendal & Sedara, 2008).

In post-conflict reconstruction society like Cambodia, more in-depth democratic processes need to be initiated, institutions built, and civic engagement encouraged. In the long run, political culture must be altered. However, the particular historical juncture, political culture, and regime legitimacy shape the mechanisms for restoring the post-conflict society. In addition, there are political processes evolving on the ground that compel



governments to take values such as accountability, participation, responsiveness, and transparency more seriously (Prum, 2005).

Currently, the importance of integrating social accountability approaches and processes in governance in East Asian and Pacific countries to improve service delivery, enhance welfare protection, and strengthen citizen's rights has been recognized.

Accountability, however, is an ambiguous and relational concept. Different social, cultural, and historical contexts shape its contents and styles. Various researches have indicated that accountability is one of the most important means in the reform process of the Cambodian government.¹ It has moved to the forefront of both the Cambodian government's and the donor community's reform agenda in recent years, particularly those that focus on good governance poverty reduction and democratic involvement.

Accountability between community-based organizations (CBOs) and local authorities remains weak and blurred (Kim & Ojendal, 2007). This is perhaps because public reform initiatives that donors introduce are Western-oriented, failing to factor in specific social and cultural conditions in the country. As a result, these efforts are poorly understood, much less owned by Cambodian policy makers.

In Cambodia, vast informal relational networks underlie the formal governance system. These informal networks also shape formal bureaucratic activities and functions. Higher and lower levels of government, civil servants, and politicians lack an adequate understanding of institutional and individual accountability. Accountability in the Khmer language is a term that the public does not understand.

In the last seven years, however, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has actively initiated different reforms as part of the process of democratic decentralization. These reforms included the holding of commune elections in 2002, the Rectangular Strategy² in 2004, and the Organic Law (OL) in 2008. The immediate objective of the decentralization and deconcentration (D&D) strategy of the RGC is to develop democratic, participatory, accountable, and effective institutions of government at the provincial/municipal, district/*khan*,³ and commune/*sangkat* levels.

Reforms in democratic representation strengthen the sub-national levels by expanding their powers, duties, responsibilities and resources.



UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE CAMBODIAN CONTEXT

Social Accountability is a relatively new term and is, as yet, poorly understood by the general public. Among the reasons cited for this lack of understanding is the dearth of experiences in the country of a responsible and accountable state; and the retarded development of effective state or intermediary institutions as a result of Cambodia's recent history of protracted conflict and violent transitions.

Participation of the people introduces systems and procedures to ensure that constituents, especially women, vulnerable groups and indigenous minorities take part in decision-making at the local government level. Public sector accountability strengthens accountability at all levels of administration and facilitates citizens' oversight of the administrative and financial affairs of those in the administration. Allowing citizens to participate in planning and monitoring public services will improve effectiveness in the delivery of public services (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2004).

Good governance is the cornerstone of the 2004 Rectangular Strategy of the RGC focusing on four reform areas: (1) anti-corruption, (2) legal and judicial reform, (3) public administration reform including decentralization and deconcentration, and (4) reform of the armed forces, especially demobilization. The 2008 Organic Law aims to redefine the administrative management and unify administration at the sub-national level of municipality, province, city, and district/*khan*.

While all these reforms promote and enhance social accountability, the concept remains ambiguous and complex to many in Cambodia.

The term social accountability, *kanak neiyapheap sangkhum* in Khmer, is primarily understood as responsibility, honesty, and transparency. Its meaning is closely linked to the moral responsibility (*ka tortuol khos trov prorkorb doy thor*) and obligation of leaders to respond to the needs of the people. It is a relatively new term and is, as yet, poorly understood by the general public. Among the reasons cited for this lack of understanding is the dearth of experiences in the country of a responsible and accountable state; and the retarded development of effective state or intermediary institutions as a result of Cambodia's recent history of protracted conflict and violent transitions.



Different stakeholders have varying perceptions of social accountability. Some are very skeptical that it can ever be applied in Cambodian society, given the existing context of political patronage and control of the dominant political party. Other stakeholders, on the other hand, see the evolving concept of social accountability as an opportunity to build trust between the state and the citizenry.

The study yielded a partial list of current social accountability practices and tools utilized by civil society organizations, donors, the private sector, and the government. These mechanisms are helping to alter, albeit slowly, the cultural and political landscape of Cambodia. They are also shaping the evolving meaning and understanding of social accountability.

CULTURE OF POWER AND KARMA ON CAMBODIAN SOCIETY

The past few decades of Cambodia's contemporary history have been characterized by a period of protracted conflict. From the early 1970s until 1993, Cambodia underwent many political and economic changes. It transitioned through different political systems—from the monarchy, republic, Stalinist communism and genocide, and more recently, democratic government.

In the 1980s, Cambodia adopted a centralized command economy and later switched to a free market economy. Although the country shifted in the early 1990s from authoritarian rule to a parliamentary form of government, democracy in Cambodia remains imperfectly realized. From one regime to another, power transitions have been usually carried out through fierce fighting and bloodshed. In Cambodian political culture, power is not shared but largely rests on individuals or groups instead of state institutions (Kim, 2009).

Two related phenomena could be seen occurring within Cambodia's historical context. First, the country has experienced the rule of many different political regimes and parties with differing and competing theories and ideologies over a short period of time. Second, the country has been unable to achieve peaceful transformation of power from one regime to another based on democratic principles. Each political regime in the recent past had not been transformed by democratic power but instead had been



overthrown quickly. These serious historical interruptions have held back the development of state institutions and created difficulty in building trust (*ka tuk chet*) and legitimacy between rulers and the ruled. This lack of trust and the dearth of experiences of a responsible and accountable state make it difficult to cultivate an awareness of the contractual relationship between citizens and state, lending weakness to social accountability.

Political Culture

Cambodian political culture shares similarities with the political systems of Southeast Asian countries, where individual performance is intertwined with traditional and cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes that affect the way state systems function (Hanks, 1962). Other factors such as patronage, kinship, religion (in this case, Buddhism), and rent-seeking behavior⁴ also influence social accountability in Cambodia (Chandler, 2003; Ebihara, 1968).

The societal structure contains a collection of formal and informal patterns, each interacting with kinship, shared beliefs and religion, the court, and the elite. Remaining largely intact in Cambodian society is the Buddhist concept of karma and merit-making, which is the belief that a person's status in society in his present life is determined by his performance in the previous life (Kim, 2001). It is widely believed that personal status can be improved by virtuous actions, sponsoring temples, and community development.

The relationship between leaders and followers is based on patronage and it shapes the perceptions of people on power, politics, and economics. Steep power differentials, which prohibit the ability of citizens to claim rights and freedom in the face of official high-handedness (Hughes, 2003), generally characterize power relations between state officials and civilians. Most Cambodians view contact with representatives of the state at any level as threatening and something that should be avoided if possible. Power is not shared; it is accumulated and protected. Cambodian rulers build their political systems based on familiar aspects of traditional political culture, aiming to promote democracy within an authoritarian political model (John, 2005).

The central symbolism of Cambodian political culture revolves around the idea of power, which is decidedly a zero-sum game. Securing compliance and power is accumulated by force or strength (*komlaing*), which is believed to



belong to the semantic nexus of the warrior image. The power of Cambodian society rests in the person of high officials, not in its offices or institutions. As such, power is personalized and serves the purpose of the leaders rather than the public. Cambodian political life assumes a form of patronage that is hierarchical and absolutist, creating weak state institutions as the channel of power goes through political/private party lines. This culture of patronage tolerates deviant behavior by those who violate the social norms without serious consequences. The way Cambodian rulers exercise power does not serve to promote democracy in the form of institutional arrangement, moral responsibility, and political tolerance. Rather, power is used as an absolute means to enforce compliance and build the coercive strength of the leaders.

Political Institutions and Elections

A weak state—controlled by all-powerful leaders with strong political machinery—figures prominently in Cambodia’s long history of conflict. In the post-war period, party competition has become more pluralist with free elections regularly organized by Cambodians themselves. Yet the degree of institutionalization has been strongly influenced by the configuration of powerful political parties. While research have shown that citizens as voters are aware of electoral accountability, elections are constrained by strong control of political parties, vote-buying, and, sometimes, intimidation (Kim, 2009). These constraints discourage people from exercising their free will when choosing their leaders. Political parties and party activists do not fully subscribe to nor practice democratic principles. Political parties that control the state do not distinguish between their private interests and those of the public. Information flows through local authorities and the political party network.

In a recent survey conducted in five provinces (Kim 2009), 583 voters were asked, “If the elected commune councillors are not accountable to voters or do not serve the voter, do you have the power to change them in the next election?” About 90% of voter-respondents said that they could vote the elected Commune Council members out of office, indicating citizens’ growing awareness of the power of the ballot.



Citizen-State Relations

Various research show that Cambodian society lacks formal organizational structures (Bit, 1991). The social interaction of peasants revolves around kinship ties at the level of the individual household and the nuclear family. Despite some forms of community coherence, most of civil society interactions in Cambodian society, particularly in rural communities, are embedded in patron-client and rent-seeking relations. The horizontal and downward accountability line of interaction largely occurs within the relationships among villagers, kinsmen, close friends, neighbors, and the Buddhist temple (*wat*). Social interaction within Cambodian society is informal and does not reach far beyond kinsmen, close friends, and neighbors. Some studies have emphasized that Cambodia lacks intermediary institutions to close the gap between the state and society or between the rural and central authorities. Bit Seanglim (1991) makes his observation of Cambodian society:

It is noteworthy that Cambodian culture has not developed any other social institutions or groups beyond the family structure which might facilitate the concept of collective social responsibility. Cambodia does not have a tradition of associations, volunteer groups, trade unions, or other networks composed of people who come together for a common purpose. The formats of religious traditions are decentralized with an emphasis on the immediate locale and the village temple. Opportunities for exchanging experiences, cooperation, or identifying with a larger group are restricted to the groups which already form the basis for a social identity, namely, the family and the village. (Bit, 1991, p. 49).

According to Bit, Cambodian society is missing two key aspects: (1) collective social responsibility/accountability facilitated by intermediary institutions, and (2) a tradition of associations that come together for a common purpose.

Restricted Democratic Space for Civil Society

Civil society is one of the most powerful forces, along with social capital and civility that could promote democratic development. Gordon White defines civil society as



[a]n 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 extent their interests or values. (White, 1994)

Civil society organizations perform the role of raising people's political consciousness and mobilizing them to challenge the power of the state. This form of participation can help to restrain the power of the elite while increasing the power of society.

Discussions about civil society in Cambodia have largely revolved around non-government organizations (NGOs), often international NGOs (I-NGOs) and their clients (Un, 2005).

The study of Kim and Ann (2005) classified grassroots organizations in Cambodia into two primary types: (1) organic groups, which are traditional and have been in existence in Cambodian society for many generations; and (2) mandated groups, which are often established by international organizations. The latter groups are fairly new in Cambodian society. The same study identified the existing organic and mandated groups in rural areas in Cambodia (Kim & Sovatha, 2005). Table 1 shows a partial list with a description.

In his study on civil society, public space, and democratization in Cambodia, Kheang Un points out that efforts of civil society organizations to push for judicial reforms have been weak because they lack a systematic strategy. The ineffectiveness of Cambodian NGOs (CNGOs) stems from their urban-based character because they emerged from international political support and engagement. The rise of CNGOs has not been accompanied by an enlargement of democratic space in rural areas.

Another factor that makes CNGOs ineffective is the character of their internal governance (e.g. organizational structures, operations, and top-to-bottom approach), which falls short of being democratic and mirror the patron-client relationships endemic in Cambodian political culture.

There are many factors that make it difficult for genuine civil society to grow in the current political arena of Cambodia. The state continues to restrict democratic space, limiting NGOs' ability to expand their activities and promote further democratic consolidation. NGOs' dependence on



Table 1. Existing organic and mandated groups in rural areas in Cambodia.

CITIZEN GROUP	DESCRIPTION/FUNCTION
Wat or Pagoda Committee	This committee usually represents more than one village and typically consists of senior, well-respected volunteers who help and represent the pagoda. Members are not usually elected
School Support Committee (SSC)	This is usually composed of respected people such as teachers, school principals, local authority representatives, and parents. Its main task is to safeguard and ensure the sustainability of school activities
Funeral Committee	This is not a permanent group but is formed to help poor families that cannot afford a proper funeral for their loved departed
Midwife Association (also known as Health Association)	Often operating with technical support from NGOs, its primary task is to assist in promoting hygiene awareness and to help bring the sick to provincial clinics if necessary
Help the Ages Association	This group is formed to help poor, elderly people in the community. It usually consists of senior, respected people and members of the Wat Committee
Water Users Association	This association is formed in communes with a need for active water management. It is responsible for allocating water use among farmers, and for maintaining and constructing irrigation systems
Dry Season Rice Cultivation Association	This is formed only in locations where there is a possible water source for dry season rice cultivation. Its task is to mobilize resources and improve the water supply. In some provinces, it is the same as the Water Users Association
Savings Association	Sometimes this association is synonymous to a rice or piggy bank to provide mutual help to members
Community Fishery	This organization is often formed in areas adjacent to a fishing ground. It assumes the role of a watchdog for illegal fishing activities and cooperates with fishery officers and local authorities to stop illegal fishing. The local fishing community often gets technical support from different I-NGOs
Forest Community Association	This association is set up among local communities to protect forests from illegal logging and to replant fallen trees. It often receives technical support from I-NGOs but is not explicitly part of commune jurisdiction
Road Maintenance Committee	This committee is often created through the CCs (commune councils) but does not exist in all communes



foreign funding and lack of membership prevent them from sustaining their activities. Within this political context, CNGOs mostly adhere to a non-confrontational stance vis-à-vis the state, focusing on persuasion to transform government leaders' moral values by alerting them to the problems of human rights abuses, corruption, nepotism, and lack of rule of law.

Despite the restricted space for civil society engagement in government affairs, it is worth noting that citizens are opening up spaces for participation in governance. Cambodians are learning new labels for what is slowly becoming a part of their everyday concerns. A Khmer vocabulary on accountability and related concepts has been evolving.

In the English-Khmer dictionary, the term *kanak neiyapheap* (accountable/accountability) means *tortoul khos trov* (responsibility) or *arch ponyul bann* (explainable or able to explain) (Huffman and Im, 1987). *Sangkhum* is the Khmer word for social or society.

The Khmer word for social accountability is *kanak neiyapheap sangkhum*. However, an overwhelming majority of respondents in two surveys (95% of voter respondents in Kim's upcoming study⁵ and 80% of respondents in the NCDD survey (NCDD, 2008) do not know or have not heard of the term *kanak neiyapheap*. In Kim's study, 81% of CC member-respondents have heard of *kanak neiyapheap* but have given mixed definitions.

Kanak neiyapheap (social accountability) is primarily understood as responsibility, honesty, and transparency. A closer look at the Khmer term for responsibility, *tortoul khos trov*, shows that its meaning is related to the definition of accountability.

It means "taking responsibility" for doing the wrong thing (*tortoul khos*) and "being responsible" for doing the right thing (*tortoul trov*). The meaning of social accountability is also linked to the moral responsibility (*ka tortoul khos trov prorkorb doy thor*) and obligation of leaders to respond to the needs of the people. *Ak phibalkech laar* (good governance) is an ideal type of leadership—benevolent leadership characterized by transparency, responsibility, and absence of corruption. This is a relatively new term that was used in the 1990s to describe the functional, responsive, and accountable administration of the state.



Neak Doeuk Norm is the Khmer word for leader or someone who takes the lead for a particular task or duty. One of the valued characteristics of a leader is honesty and trustworthiness. *Ka tuk chet* or *smarmos trang* (being trustworthy or honest) refers to a quality of a person who neither cheats nor lies, and acts with honor and respect. This is related to the moral responsibility of individuals, especially those in positions of authority or power (*komlaing*).

Kar tor sou mate or advocacy and expressing or voicing out ideas is one of the ways in which citizens can exact accountability from the government. *Kar tor sou mate* literally means “to struggle for an idea”, a term coined by NGOs in the late 1990s (Clamor, 2000). This term is not widely understood outside the NGO community. Many NGOs form networks (*bandaine*) to promote or advance their causes.

STUDIES ON SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN CAMBODIA

There are few academic researches on social accountability in Cambodia. The following is a review of some pertinent studies.

Accountability Toward Donors

Michael Barton’s *Empowering a New Civil Society* (2001) reveals that the growth and strength of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Cambodia has depended on the presence of donor agencies, the prevailing political situation, government support and recognition, and the development of local communities and Cambodian society as a whole. Since most CSOs are financially dependent on donors, they are more accountable toward the latter.

The prevailing political situation presents a challenge for CSOs to mount large scale demonstrations because many NGOs fear a direct confrontation with the government. It is also difficult for grassroots CSOs to grow in a sustained manner because it is hard to mobilize people who are more oriented to material output. With a weak civil society, demanding social



accountability remains a stiff challenge in Cambodia. The government should allow more space for NGOs and civil society to work effectively.

White Hat and Black Hat Governance

Hughes and Un's *Cambodia Governance Analysis* (2006) examines three main elements of governance: state capacity, accountability, and responsiveness. They distinguish between two types of governance in state capacity: white hat and black hat. *White hat* governance conforms broadly to rational-legal modes, while black hat governance operates via entrepreneurial and personal relationships. *Black hat* governance is devoted to a great extent to rent-seeking practices. Organized around allegiances based upon marriage, kinship, and a network of patronage, black hat governance predominates in Cambodian politics. However, in the past 15 years, it has been necessary for black hat governance to be counterbalanced by sufficient white hat activity to maintain cordial relations with Cambodia's donors.

At any rate, the government continues to be reluctant to establish systematic accountability measures through the promotion of an independent judiciary with real powers to scrutinize the activities of the state. Thus, the two types of governance co-exist and shape the level of accountability in Cambodia. With the prevalence of corruption and rent-seeking practices, government is largely unresponsive to the promotion of political, civil, and economic rights of the poor. However, there have been some improvements in government responsiveness through decentralization and deconcentration reforms (Hughes & Un, 2006).

Local Governance and Community Organizations

In "Where Decentralization Meets Democracy: Civil Society, Local Government, and Accountability in Cambodia", Kim and Ojendal (2007) look at the relationship between CBOs and local government, particularly elected Commune Councils.

The participation and mobilization of CBOs is generally weak because people lack commitment. Only the chiefs and deputies of CBOs are active at the beginning but they cease implementing activities when funding dries up.



Individual self-interest largely drives the social dynamics in rural communities.

Nonetheless, the current relationship between CBOs and the elected commune council is generally good because it does not involve money and power. The study shows that CCs are performing relatively well. They are downwardly accountable and responsive to voters but face many difficulties because most of the powers that are supposed to be devolved to them are still with the line agencies (Kim & Ojendal, 2007).

Accountability and Patronage

The study, “Accountability and Neo-Patrimonialism in Cambodia: A Critical Literature Review”, describes Cambodian society as hybridized, combining many informal elements such neo-patrimonialism⁶ and rent-seeking. Patronage networks especially penetrate ministries in charge of exploiting resources and disrupt effective public administration and service delivery. Entrenched and institutionalized from the national to local levels, the current state of neo-patrimonialism in Cambodia undermines judicial accountability and the formal system of checks and balances (Pak, 2007).

Covering 310 communes and randomly sampling 620 councilors and 1,420 voters as respondents, the survey conducted by Ninh and Henke (2005) shows that more than 90% of voters trust the CCs more than the provincial and national governments. About 85% of voters expressed that all projects carried out by CCs are beneficial to the community. However, respondents do not make a clear distinction between the work of the political party and the commune. About 70% of the CC members surveyed endorse the statement that they are subordinate to district and provincial authorities. Voters see the following challenges of elected CCs: not being responsive and accountable due to the lack of funds, limited skills and capacity, lack of authority to generate local revenues, and interference by district, province, and national government.

Voices from the Ground

In “Linking Citizens and the State: An Assessment of Civil Society Contributions to Good Governance in Cambodia”, Malena and Chhim (2008)



analyze the concept of social accountability in Cambodia along four major dimensions: (1) information, (2) voice, (3) association, and (4) constructive dialogue and participation. According to the study, 80% of public information is obtained from broadcast media, mostly radio and TV; and 30% to 40% of public information is obtained through local authorities (i.e. village chiefs and CCs), relatives, friends, and neighbors. While information is crucial in enabling people to find out about government performance, the report has found that there is a lack of demand for information from public and government officials who, in turn, are not accustomed to sharing information with the public.

Findings by Malena and Chhim show that citizens are interested to voice out their opinions to their leaders. A high percentage of respondents (71%) have attended commune meetings but their participation has been largely passive. They are physically present but are reluctant to express their ideas, especially any form of criticism of government actions.

The study also shows that about 66% of CSOs belong to traditional associations that adopt more informal ways of engagement. This is a positive sign that decentralization at the commune level has created more space to increase the relationship between CBOs/CSOs with elected CCs. However, many urban-based NGOs in Cambodia are rarely membership organizations and most of them lack grassroots constituencies.

Malena and Chhim's study confirms the lack of awareness of citizens' rights and the responsibilities of government officials and the citizenry resulting in weak social contract. Even civil society actors engaged in advocacy assess their impact as limited, especially with regards to influencing policy implementation, budgeting, and expenditures. Unable to mediate more effectively between state and society, they feel that they have not succeeded in bringing about broad-based impacts or structural reforms. Thus, there is a lack of constructive dialogue and meaningful participation in the public sphere.

A 2008 baseline survey conducted by the National Committee for the Management of Decentralization and Deconcentration Reforms (NCDD) in five provinces shows that more than 80% of respondents have not heard of the word "accountability" in Khmer. More than 90% of respondents have not



lodged a formal complaint against their commune council. About 65% of respondents agree that CCs are more accountable to voters and the public. Half (56%) of the respondents feel that CC authorities keep citizens properly informed. About 72% of respondents agree to some extent that their CCs are responsive to their priority needs, which are mostly small-scale infrastructures. However, most of the voters do not know the funding sources of commune projects (NCDD, 2008).

An upcoming study by Kim has initially found that people generally agree that CCs are responsive to voters' needs to a certain extent. However, the quantity and speed of CCs' responsiveness remain limited. The concept of accountability and its Khmer term is not understood by the majority of the people. The study has also found that citizens and government officials' awareness of rights and social contract is limited and weak. Since CCs are not allowed to collect local revenues, their limited financial resources make it difficult for them to be responsive and accountable to voters. Their only sources of revenue are the central government and political parties. (Kim, 2009)

Another survey conducted by the Center for Advanced Study (CAS) and Pact in 2008 shows that after more than six years since the first commune elections, many citizens remain unclear about the mandate of CCs, with nearly a quarter of respondents (22%) unable to independently identify any role attributable to the commune council. Contact between the CC and voters is as limited as the information regarding CC functions. While recognizing a degree of local corruption, voters largely trust the CC and would not object to increasing the powers of the CC (Center for Advanced Study and PACT, 2008).

SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY: A CAMBODIAN PERSPECTIVE

All informants interviewed affirm that the concept of social accountability is new to the Cambodian people. I-NGOs and donor agencies recognize that social accountability works differently depending on the social, economic, cultural, and political context. In the Cambodian context, the political culture of patronage system, hierarchy, and rent-seeking practices has always been



interwoven into the fabric of Cambodian society. Party politics remains the dominant factor shaping people's interaction with the state.

Social Accountability: A Cultural Anomaly?

Mr. Heang Path, program officer of Access to Justice Project of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), says that

The concept of social accountability is very new in Cambodian society... Traditional norms such as patronage, hierarchy, kinship ties, and rent-seeking... are very much alive in contemporary Cambodia. (Heang Path, personal communication, September 2, 2008)

Mr. Heng Monychenda, director of Buddhism for Development and an experienced civil society actor in Battambang province, is skeptical and regards the concept of social accountability as complex and difficult to apply in the social realm.

When we talk about social accountability, one needs to think about the term of accountability which can't be applied in Cambodian society. There is a lack of explanation of this new and complex term and concept. If you look carefully, the concept of accountability is related to financial figures and numbers. As such, the concept needs to be exact and quantifiable, which is not possible in the social realm. To clarify its meaning, it is good to ask the question, 'Accountable to whom and by whom?' The concept is related to social responsibility and state responsibility or state and people responsibility. (Heng Monychenda, personal communication, October 30, 2008)

Mr. Heng Raksmeay, reporter for the Voice of America (VOA), likewise expresses his pessimism on the nature of social accountability in Cambodia and its CSOs.

In order to improve citizens' engagement, every institution in Cambodia has to be independent. The laws should be the basic foundation. There are more than 2,000 CSOs established in Cambodia but these organizations work for different purposes. Some work for government, political parties, individuals, and for public interest. About 80% of CSOs serve the party in power and pay no attention to the interests of citizens. (Heng Raksmeay, personal communication, October 4, 2008)



Many respondents from the NGO sector tend to take a critical position vis-à-vis the government when expressing their views on social accountability. Some informants, however, see the concept of social accountability as a new chance to enhance trust between state and society.

Factors that Contribute to Social Accountability Practice

H.E. Ngy Chanphal, a senior government official at the Ministry of the Interior (MoI), says that focusing on the practical application of social accountability is more important than the way the term is called.

Social accountability is a new concept in the Cambodian context. However, if we can understand it well and implement it properly, it would bring in new opportunities for our country. The term is viewed differently by different actors. To me, the term is similar to the Buddhist teaching which is understood in Cambodian society as social responsibility. The way we call it is not important. The practical mechanism is more important whatever is suitable for this society. (Ngy Chanphal, personal communication, November 5, 2008)

Many respondents have suggested linking the concept of social accountability to practical issues of social responsibility. What is the state's responsibility to its citizens? What are the responsibilities of citizens?

Social accountability is normally initiated by NGOs that embrace ideas imposed by I-NGOs or donor agencies. There are currently more than 3,000 NGOs operating in Cambodia but they do not work closely together. They follow different agenda, work on a short-term basis, and are only accountable to their donors. Mr. Murari Prasad Upadhyay, director of the Commune Council Support Project (CCSP), says that

[W]hen NGOs work individually, they have no voice and are not strong enough to ask for involvement from local authorities. NGOs and CBOs should work collectively to build up a good network and be answerable to the citizens. (Murari Upadhyay, personal communication, November 7, 2008)

The weak demand for good governance from citizens could be attributed to poverty and low educational attainment. As Monychenda puts it,



Demanding good governance or having social accountability is important for our society. However, these aspects are too complex for ordinary people to understand. To improve demand-side governance or social accountability, all relevant institutions should cultivate this idea at the grassroots level and make it more accessible and practical to everyone. The Cambodian government would not respond unless there is a strong demand. It is all about demand. (Heng Monychenda, personal communication, October 30, 2008)

Accountability does not rely on one set of players or stakeholders, such as NGOs and CSOs, to act alone and independently. It requires many institutions, both government and non-government, to be actively engaged. They have to interact and work together. Different institutions and agencies, however, bring challenges or inconsistencies because they have different interests and development agenda. This slows down the process of promoting social accountability in Cambodia.

Most CC members in the rural areas are the older and respected residents in the community. Except for the commune clerk, many of them are illiterate, unable to absorb and remember new ideas and new things. Ordinary people are also not aware of their right to demand the delivery of public services. Because they do not know their roles as constituents, they do not see it as their responsibility to hold CCs or government accountable.

In addition, it is not easy to exact accountability at the grassroots level because majority of CC members come from the ruling party, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), and very few from opposition parties. This means that most CCs toe the party line. In many cases, the government budget and expenditure is kept from the public.

Readiness for Social Accountability Practice

Government, in particular, doubts whether social accountability can take root in Cambodia. The government does not believe that Cambodians are ready to undertake budget tracking and auditing exercises. Interviewed government officials say Cambodians are not very much involved in local development processes and issues. They also do not initiate communication with local authorities. The officials think local people are afraid to share their ideas and concerns in government-organized events.⁷



In contrast, Cambodians appear to be more willing to share their ideas with NGOs, which consider themselves representatives of the people. Government officials think this is not proper. NGOs, they say, should instead work to mobilize citizens and encourage them to voice their concerns using different available means. They noted a lack of coordination and minimal information-sharing between NGOs and local authorities, even among those working in the same sectors. This strains relationships between them. Moreover, they note that NGOs are implementing projects based on their contracts with donors, which means that they projects might not be sustained when funding runs out, especially at the community level.

NGOs share the government's opinion that Cambodia is not ready for the budget tracking and auditing exercise, especially since this is still off-limits as far as government is concerned. Compared with government, however, NGOs tend to have a more optimistic view of how social accountability reforms have progressed in Cambodia.⁸

Promising Signs for Social Accountability

The NGOs note that public administration reform is in progress in the aftermath of the elections at the sub-national level covering provinces, municipalities, districts, and *khans*. They say projects supporting good governance and social accountability have helped create awareness and increase capacities for this.

As a result of these initiatives, behavior and attitude changes have been noted among the citizens, CBOs, and local authorities, especially on the issue of local development. Participation has likewise increased, leading to improved coordination and greater trust among the people and the authorities in the target areas of the Local Administration and Reform (LAAR) program. People share their knowledge on social accountability with government officials at the provincial level even as they continue to teach the concepts of social accountability in universities in Battambang.

However, these challenges are small compared to the challenges that continue to confront NGOs in Cambodia. In particular, the implementation of activities with local authorities often meets resistance. It has been noted that most NGOs and local authorities are not clear on how to implement the Organic Law. Neither are they clear on the new administration structure in



the 10-year National Democratic Development Plan that was scheduled for approval in November 2009.

NGOs also worry about the local authorities' limited capacity, at the commune level, to respond to the needs of citizens. As a result, there are no substantial changes undertaken. In the absence of these, people do not see the benefits of participating in the local governance process, and they are not motivated to take part in governance-related community initiatives. They also note that some NGOs do not communicate with local authorities when they implement their activities.

Moreover, information-sharing among NGOs is still limited, even among those working for the same causes and in the same sectors. Coordination and networking among civil society members are weak. Some NGOs seek immediate benefits when joining any network, which does not help in coalition-building or in creating partnerships essential to engaging with government meaningfully. Further, most NGOs are donor-driven and might not have the community support that will sustain them when donor funding dries up.

Capacity for social accountability is still limited. Graduates of the Social Accountability School (SAS) may have a good grasp of social accountability concepts and tools, but actual implementation remains weak.

SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY TOOLS AND PRACTICES IN CAMBODIA

Despite the weak state of social accountability in Cambodia, the increasing number of initiatives from NGOs appears to be promising. For instance, the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC) has played a major role, since its inception in 1991, in strengthening cooperation between NGOs in Cambodia and has actively liaised with the RGC and donor agencies on NGO matters.

Through its Analyzing Development Issues (ADI) Project, the CCC has offered training courses to Cambodian NGO managers and field workers to develop critical thinking that would improve their work and respond to changing conditions in Cambodia. The ADI courses enable participants to understand development issues in Cambodia, develop their ability to link

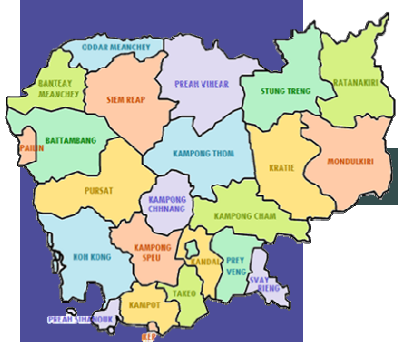


micro experiences with macro trends, and build their confidence to meaningfully contribute to discussion and debates. Through the ADI, NGOs are equipped with the skills and knowledge to engage with government on policy issues.⁹

The Commune Council Support Project (CCSP), a project of a coalition of nine international and national NGOs in Cambodia, has a program to award best practices in civil society-commune council partnerships and collaboration towards local governance reform. These best practices invariably involve elected officials who are responsive to the needs of their constituents, which is the primary indicator of social accountability.¹⁰ CCSP also has the NGOs Liaison Office (NGO-CCSP) that links government and CSOs to sustain a positive relationship and enable CSOs to give feedback to RGC on the implementation of Decentralization and Deconcentration (D&D) reform policies.¹¹

The Committee for Free and Fair Election in Cambodia (COMFREL) conducts education and public for a to encourage citizens to participate in politics and decision-making, and to advocate/lobby for electoral reforms that increase accountability of elected officials and provide comprehensive monitoring data to enable an objective, non-partisan assessment of the fulfilment of political platform and performance of elected officials. COMFREL has its origins in the Task Force on Cambodia, which came together to provide an independent, non-partisan domestic monitoring team for the May 1993 UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia) elections. COMFREL worked in close collaboration with the relevant international organizations throughout Cambodia to monitor the electoral processes before, during, and after polling day. In 1995, a decision was made to establish COMFREL as a permanent election monitoring organization. In 1997, COMFREL registered with the MoI and, thereafter, was recognized by the National Election Committee (NEC) as one of three organizations to be given priority in observing the 1998 National Assembly election.

During the 1998 National Assembly election, COMFREL's network extended to the village level nationwide, with 11,000 volunteer observers covering almost 95% of polling stations. COMFREL is currently revamping



its network and has plans for added capacity building in advance of the planned commune/*sangkat* council elections.¹²

Amara, an NGO based in Battambang province that is involved in issues related to gender/women and human rights/democracy, has facilitated the successful and sustainable implementation of commune development plans. Buddhism for Development (BFD), an NGO promoting socially-engaged Buddhism in Cambodia, has about 2,000 Peace Development Volunteers (PDVs) who play a significant role at the grassroots level in increasing public awareness of basic human rights, the rule of law, and peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms. The PDVs are the new emerging educated elites at the grassroots level that can promote social accountability initiatives.

The Cambodian Center for Study and Development in Agriculture (CEDAC) is considered the biggest agricultural and rural development NGO in Cambodia, providing direct assistance to about 100,000 families in 20 provinces in the country. CEDAC helped set up the first national farmer network in 2003 by providing coordination and capacity-building support. Farmer organizations have become vital for the development of sustainable agriculture in Cambodia and could function as the mechanism for members to voice out their demands from the government. A case in point are the farmers' associations in Kompong Thom province that worked together to ban the importation of pigs to Cambodia.

The Local Administration and Reform (LAAR) project of PACT Cambodia has successfully used social accountability tools at the grassroots and sub-national levels. It has used Community Management Courses, participatory planning, and outreach programs to mobilize people's participation in local development. LAAR also used the information boards to inform the public on the progress of their commune.

B&D has successfully applied some social accountability tools such as Community Rating Report (CRR) in Battambang province. It has endeavored to convince the sub-national authority to participate in its activities in order to foster trust between the government and NGOs. The Community Research Team (CRT) plays an important role in conducting the CRR.

Table 2 shows a sampling of social accountability tools that I-NGOs and donor agencies use.



Table 2. A sampling of social accountability tools used in Cambodia and the donor agencies using them.

SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY TOOLS	AGENCY USING TOOL
Outreach, monitoring, and social development	PACT
Training, advocacy, assisting in forming CBOs or grassroots networks, and information-sharing	
Coordinating with government to form private sector-government public forum	IFC
Assisting private sectors in creating a cartel of rice millers, brick-making, and construction associations/unions to improve investment climate	IFC
Research and survey	CCSP, PACT
Improving capacity of the Chamber of Commerce	IFC
Citizen Rating Reports (CRR), improving capacity of elected CCs, networking, improving capacity of NGOs/CBOs	CCSP
Cooperating with government on D&D and work on the reform process of the sub-national level (district and provincial)	
Community Management Course (CMC)	Fur Die Freiheit

GOVERNMENT AND CSO INITIATIVES FOR SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Despite the observed lack of coordination with civil society groups, some government agencies have helped push for social accountability initiatives with civil society. The MoI helped coordinate the Demand for Good Governance (DFGG) project in three state institutions: the “One Window Services” of the MoI, the National Radio of Kampuchea (NRK), and the Arbitration Council of the Ministry of Labor. The DFGG is being carried out to support state institutions. It also supports non-state institutions by providing partnership and citizen grants through The Asia Foundation (TAF). The 10-Year National Program for Sub-National Democratic Development has also been drafted. The Project Coordination Office (PCO) of DFGG is now in the process of recruiting Research and Training Organizations (RTOs).

Demand for Good Governance Initiatives

As a result of the DFGG, public administrative reforms are in progress after the election at sub-national levels such as in provinces, municipalities,



districts, and *khans*. Procedures and guidelines for sub-national governance are now in the process of being developed. The One Window Services of the MoI has set up a mechanism at the district level to get feedback for the improvement of local service providers.

Because of positive experience in the delivery of services at the district level in two target areas, namely Siem Reap and Battambang, the DFGG project will be expanded to 24 provinces in Cambodia in the next three years. The One Window Services has undertaken varied initiatives such as a yearly public forum, monthly meetings, citizen hours, weekly meetings with district governors, and semestral meetings with CSOs and the private sectors. Already, the PCO office has initiated the creation of a mechanism for sharing learning and experiences between CSOs and the government. Other services will be implemented once the RTOs have been recruited. Using the framework of the DFGG program, the following initiatives are planned to encourage greater discussion and participation: public forums, debates, roundtable discussions, video mobiles, information-education-communication (IEC) materials, as well as good governance meetings to be organized and facilitated by the PCO.

The NRK, for its part, has worked on the content of its programs to help meet the objectives of the DFGG and will expand its activities to include institutional capacity-building. It plans to hold talk shows on specific governance issues and will encourage feedback through radio. Reporters will also be trained and monitored to make sure they are the ones reading the news to the public. It aims to revitalize its institutional processes for it to deliver these.

The Ministry of National Assembly, Senate Relations and Inspection (MONASRI) is helping to increase public awareness of relevant laws and regulations among local authorities and the people themselves. For example, the Arbitration Council (AC) of the Ministry of Labor has set up labor laws to ensure that industrial peace is kept. A conflict resolution forum that was established between employees and employers for the garments sector demonstrated this. Moving forward, planning will be made at the district/*khan* level to enable the sub-national government to help communities, facilitate coordination, and improve efficiency. Alongside this, the AC of the Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training says it will organize training



programs for its provincial departments to acquaint them with their roles and responsibilities. It is also going to organize a National Industrial Relations Conference to share lessons learned. The AC also plans to hold collective bargaining training for union workers and to publish decisions.

The MONASRI has also used a public forum to increase awareness for land laws among the citizens of Takeo. It plans to use the RNK program to educate people on legal matters. Tools to be used include roundtable discussions, talk-back programs, mobile news, and other IEC materials and strategies. Despite its limited experience in working with local NGOs, MONASRI plans to work with CSOs in the future. Partnerships with CSOs will prove helpful as MONASRI pushes the legislation of the access to information law.

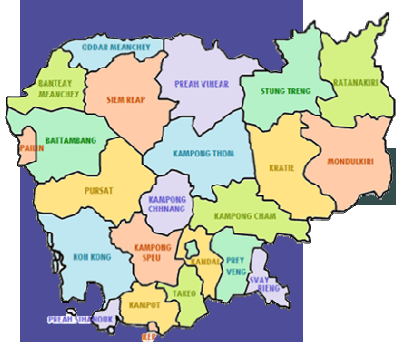
Program to Enhance Capacity in Social Accountability

To promote the reform process toward good governance, government officials recommended that the Program to Enhance Capacity in Social Accountability (PECSA) should continue to be involved in initiatives to build the capacity of local NGOs and CBOs on good governance and social accountability. The NGO groups shared this outlook.

PECSA is implemented by the World Bank, and is endorsed by the MoI. It responds to the Rectangular Strategy of the RGC, which recognizes that weak governance is a major obstacle to sustainable and broad-based development and poverty reduction in Cambodia.¹³ PECSA is the precursor of the DFGG project, and is implemented to fulfil two main objectives: (1) to enhance civil society capacities in designing and implementing social accountability and good governance, and (2) to build on and scale up the existing efforts of civil society to help the government be more effective.

Through PECSA, projects to support good governance and social accountability have been implemented. These are mainly in the form of training and capacity building. So far, over 2,000 people, including 55 women, have been trained on the concepts and tools of social accountability and good governance.

PECSA also funds social accountability projects administered by TAF. STAR Kampuchea also maintains a social accountability provincial network



covering 15 provinces. A resource center has, likewise, been set up in each province.

NGOs say the LAAR of PACT Cambodia is a move in the right direction. This is being undertaken in cooperation with the MoI and operates in eight provinces covering 356 communes in partnership with 13 NGOs.

Table 3 shows the social accountability tools that local NGOs use, which are similar to the tools that donors and international agencies use.

Table 3. A sampling of social accountability tools used in Cambodia and the local NGOs using them.

SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY TOOLS	AGENCY USING TOOL
Advocacy, networking, information sharing, training, rural livelihood development	Most local NGOs
Citizen Advisor	KID
Collaboration and networking with local and sub-national government	COMFREL, CCC
Hearing, speaking, complaining, demanding role and responsibility of leaders or state	BFD
Advocacy, electoral education, election monitoring, training	COMFREL
Mediation and conflict resolution	Arbitration Council
Teaching children and raising awareness on hygiene, environment to school children	Youth associations, Mlup Bai Tong
Training, research	ADI, CCC
Spot-checking, staff capacity-building, monitoring, and coaching. Cooperating with sub-national government and improving capacity of CCs	Amara
Public dialogue, training, advocacy	SILAKA
Tripartite mechanism for conflict resolution	Arbitration Council Foundation
Monitoring the national budget	NGO Forum

THE ROLE OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR IN SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The private or business sector is an emerging civil society stakeholder that can contribute to social accountability in Cambodia even if a segment of this sector, the economic elite, is strongly criticized for being closely associated with top politicians and for adopting rent-seeking practices. However, most private sector groups are not aware that they are using social accountability



tools and mechanisms that influence the government, such as the formation of networks and associations, because they view themselves as entirely operating separately from the state, with very limited and occasional engagement on social issues.

Nonetheless, the Federation of Rice Millers is a good example of a civil society stakeholder that is using the strength of its increasing membership to lobby with the government. It was established to represent the interests of Cambodian millers, and to increase value added to domestic rice processing.

The following is an initial list of the social accountability tools that the private sector is using:

- Public forum between the private sector and government that is held twice a year.
- Formation of eight working groups (such as export processing, SME, tourism, agriculture and rice miller associations, banking, finance, energy, transportation, and infrastructure) that participate in public forums.
- Active engagement to influence policy through the Chamber of Commerce.
- Creation of different occupation associations such as rice millers’ associations, brick mill associations, construction associations, and labor unions.
- Engaging with international agencies such as IFC, WB, ADB, and JICA for professional business development through training and study tours.

Many media organizations, particularly newspapers, do not exercise independence and professionalism, and often act as mouthpieces of political parties. Only a few media groups (such as VOA and Radio Free Asia) operate independently of the government and political parties. Those that push for social accountability from the state use tools that are risky or confrontational and make them vulnerable to reprisals. Labor unions use similar social accountability tools as listed below:

- Advocacy via print media (newspapers and magazines)
- Broadcast media (radio and TV)
- Training and creation of associations
- Public demonstration and strikes
- Advocacy with government on labor laws to improve the working conditions of workers

At any rate, the government has shown increasing signs of being socially accountable. Many leaders, especially those who are elected, are listening



and cooperating with CSOs. Below are some of the tools that the Cambodian government uses to exercise social accountability:

- Formulating relevant policies and conducting policy dialogues
- Inter-ministerial collaboration
- Training and dissemination of information
- Coordination with donors and NGOs/CSOs
- Construction of needed local infrastructure and delivery of basic services

ADVANCING SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY PRACTICE IN CAMBODIA

Government and NGOs have many ideas on how to advance good governance through social accountability tools in Cambodia. Most of these acknowledge the importance of engaging each other and involving the community to achieve meaningful results. For instance, government officials say that CBOs and local authorities should share responsibility in implementing joint activities at the local level. In this case, the NGOs could facilitate the activity while local authorities can mobilize the people to ensure participation in the event.

If they are to work for reforms that will lead to good governance, Cambodia’s citizens need capacity-building. Government representatives have identified the need for training on social accountability for the district governor or the deputy governor in charge of One Window Services. Likewise, the Provincial Accountability Committee Working Group also needs to build its capacity in understanding the new governance structures.

NGOs also need to build their capacity in communicating as well as in planning for activities to be undertaken at the district and *khan* levels. To improve engagement, NGOs should learn how to communicate more effectively with local authorities and government, especially in providing positive feedback and constructive criticism.

They also acknowledge the need to build the capacities of communities so that they can continue to be involved in development concerns so that they can continue to be involved in development concerns even in the absence of NGOs. The grassroots have to be empowered and engaged to



ensure the delivery of services and benefits. It is important to focus on building the demand side of good governance by involving the grassroots in pilot activities. More work should be carried out to find a model on how to provide support to grassroots organizations such as CBOs, community groups, and minority committees.

To further build up the capacity of local NGOs/CBOs on good governance and social accountability, concepts can be localized or indigenized and local resource persons can be tapped. Echo training should also be carried out to ensure that more people learn about the concepts and tools of social accountability. A network of social accountability practitioners should also be established to sharpen people’s skills in tools application, especially in the local communities. To do this, it is important to expand the discussions to the provinces and with government agencies at all levels.

Best practices in the Cambodian context should be shared. Success stories should be documented so that these can serve as models.

To build demand for good governance, public awareness should be raised among Cambodians. Media and government institutions have important roles to play in achieving this. Government and NGO representatives suggest that public institutions such as the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports should look at how it can incorporate social accountability in their curricula. NGOs should also take an active part in raising public awareness, especially on important programs like the DFGG, by using appropriate materials such as leaflets and other audio visual aids.

The passage of the Access to Information Law is also deemed important by stakeholders as necessary to improve social accountability. This should be accompanied by an appropriate feedback or grievance mechanism.

Government and CSOs acknowledge the need to improve coordination between themselves and with other stakeholders to ensure the support and sustainability of projects.

Coordination will also eliminate the duplication of work in some areas, and will balance work on the supply and demand side of good governance. In the interest of efficiency and expansion, NGOs should build on their existing projects and work on expanding these to the provincial, municipality, and district levels.



Partnerships should also be nurtured and harnessed. NGOs recommended the establishment of a NGO directors' forum to share information as well as to develop a common long-term vision and strategic plan for civil society in Cambodia. As organized groups, NGOs will be able to leverage their collective strength especially in dealing with government and donors. Beyond coalition-building, this will help build trust among NGOs and will enable them to reach out to NGOs in other sectors—possibly using one of the 15 existing networks set up by Star Kampuchea around Cambodia.

In all these, integrity is most important. NGOs and all involved in good governance should remain neutral and be mindful that they do not take sides with political parties. In the end, they are accountable only to the people.

ALTERING THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF CAMBODIA

From the review of available literature and interviews with key informants, the term social accountability, *kanak neiyapheap sangkhum*, appear to be a relatively new concept in Cambodia that is poorly understood by the general public. Among the reasons cited for this lack of understanding is the dearth of experiences in the country of a responsible and accountable state. Cambodia's recent history of protracted conflict and violent transitions has retarded the development of effective state or intermediary institutions beyond the family and kinship system that could facilitate the concept of collective social responsibility.

By and large, political power has rested on individuals or groups instead of state institutions. Power (*komlaing*) has been used to enforce compliance and build the coercive strength of leaders with a system of patronage instead of serving the interests of the public. With the lack of legitimacy and trust between the rulers and the ruled, there is little awareness of the contractual relationships between citizens and state. As a result, the people do not demand social accountability from the state and the state does not practice it. The weak demand for good governance from citizens can also be attributed to poverty and low educational attainment.

The increase in development efforts in post-conflict Cambodia has led to the establishment of democratic institutions, such as the ratification of a liberal constitution and the holding of regular elections, and the broadening



of democratic space through decentralization and deconcentration. The result is a hybrid regime where rational/legal (white hat) and patronage/neo-patrimonial (black hat) modes of governance co-exist.

Respondents who are familiar with the concept of social accountability primarily understand it as responsibility, honesty, and transparency. Social accountability is semantically related to the concept of social responsibility (*kanak neiyapheap sangkhum*) or moral responsibility (*ka tortoul khos trov prorkorb doy thor*) of the leaders and citizens. Responsibility (*tortoul khos trov*) is a popular term that ordinary people use and understand. The Buddhist belief in *karma* and merit-making play an important role in reinforcing moral behavior. Leaders are morally responsible to use their authority to respond to the needs of the people. After many elections on the national and local levels, people are starting to be aware of their rights as citizens to hold their elected officials accountable.

The primary social accountability stakeholders are CSOs because they perform the role of raising people's political consciousness and mobilizing them to challenge the power of the state. In Cambodia, there are two types of grassroots organizations: (1) organic groups, which are traditional and have been in existence in Cambodian society for many generations; and (2) mandated groups, which have recently emerged through the support of international organizations. Other civil society stakeholders are media organizations, labor unions, occupational groups, youth associations, and private sector.

These different stakeholders have varying perceptions of social accountability. Some NGOs critical of government are skeptical that social accountability could ever be applied in Cambodian society—given the existing context of political patronage and control of the dominant political party; the lack of awareness and demand from the public; and the disjointed efforts and conflicting agenda, and sometimes undemocratic character, of NGOs, including their dependence on external financial support. On the other hand, some key informants see the evolving concept of social accountability as an opportunity to build trust between the state and the citizenry.

The increasing number of initiatives from NGOs shows that despite the weak state of social accountability in Cambodia, there have been some



modest gains in closely collaborating with government and enabling them to be more responsive to the needs of the public. The tools include training and capacity-building, monitoring of elections and government performance, public forums and dialogue, advocacy, education and awareness-raising, mediation and conflict resolution, and formation of associations and networks. Confrontational modes include public demonstrations and strikes. Emerging civil society stakeholders, such as federations and occupational associations, use the strength of their numbers to engage and lobby with the government.

To enable the public to understand social accountability, the focus should be on its practical application—the tools and mechanism used by citizens and stakeholders—rather than its conceptual explanation. However, the largely state-controlled media in Cambodia presents veritable constraints in disseminating information on social accountability to the public.

At the grassroots level, it is important to use existing local and traditional mechanisms instead of introducing new social accountability mechanisms. For instance, each CC is required to set up an “accountability box” and bulletin board. After seven years, however, villagers neither come to write any suggestion or file any complaint in the box nor come to read the information posted on the bulletin board. Instead, information is disseminated in meetings and spread through word-of-mouth.

The best mechanism to help Cambodian society internalize the importance of social accountability is to introduce it in the educational curriculum and to target the youth (i.e. aged 24 and under), who roughly comprise 60% of the country’s population, in awareness-raising programs. The post-war generation would be more exposed and more open to democratic practices and new ideas. An educated citizenry is more likely to demand accountability from the government.

Persuasive and collaborative modes of demanding social accountability from the government appear to produce more favorable results than confrontational approaches.

The government, in turn, has exercised social accountability in various forms, such as construction of needed infrastructure and delivery of basic services at the local level and conducting policy dialogues with CSOs at the national level. In recent years, the RGC has actively initiated various



democratic reforms, especially decentralization and deconcentration, and place good governance at the center of the RGC’s economic policy agenda. This bodes well for further democratic consolidation in the country.

Increasing civil society engagement and recent democratic reform are the important processes that are slowly altering the cultural and political landscape of Cambodia. They are shaping the evolving meaning, understanding, and practice of social accountability in the country.



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