

OCCASIONAL PAPERS

KONRAD ADENAUER FOUNDATION

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DEMOCRATIC
DEVELOPMENT



CAMBODIAN COMMUNE COUNCILS
– FIRST STEPS

BY
THE KHMER INSTITUTE OF DEMOCRACY

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Konrad
Adenauer
Stiftung

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KONRAD ADENAUER FOUNDATION
KINGDOM OF CAMBODIA

THE KONRAD ADENAUER FOUNDATION

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation is a German political foundation named after the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany after the Second World War. The KAF provides counseling and education on good governance with a view to promote democratic political institutions and policies. The KAF works in 120 countries world wide. Half of the foundation's activities continues to be done in Germany. The office in Cambodia has been established in 1994. The partners include the National Assembly and the Senate, the Council of Ministers, the Ministry of Interior and selected other Ministries, the political parties represented in Parliament, media and civil society organizations. In recent years particular emphasis has been given to the support of democratic decentralization.

OCCASIONAL PAPERS ON DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

In this series the KAF will make available documents emanating from the cooperation with its partners in Cambodia which appear of interest beyond the specific program work.

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PREFACE

Many studies have been published on the state of affairs in the commune councils of Cambodia since democratic elections raised them to democratic legitimacy in 2002. Some studies were made available very soon after the start of the reform. This is an indication of the volume and the care of the support that has been provided by the Cambodian state and by foreign organizations of different faiths and viewpoints. Our partners' and our own impression of the progress made since 2002 is positive. Yet, it seems difficult to understand the local dimensions of this political reform and to convey it to newcomers.

I feel that this report achieves much of these aims. It is empirical without being representative or attempting to be so. It shows that there are successes and less satisfactory experiences. It provides indicative quotes from 27 in depth interviews, 68 questionnaires and 271 surveys.

The first steps towards communal self-administration seem to have been taken with some skill, much motivation and even higher expectations. May the second mandate commune councillors enjoy as much enthusiasm and support as the first one.

With this report, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation begins a series of "occasional papers". This is done with a view to share some output of our partners' and our work. I hope that this first volume of the series will be appreciated and useful.

Thanks and appreciation is highly deserved by one of our partners, the Khmer Institute of Democracy (KID), its Executive Director Nay Dina and her staff. They have excelled in their work at the commune level for many years. From this experience a very interesting report has been produced. I highly recommend it to all those who wish to learn more about the Cambodian commune councils at the end of their first mandate.

Wolfgang Meyer
Country Representative
Konrad Adenauer Foundation

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FOREWORD

Democratization reached a milestone in Cambodia when the central government decided to delegate some of its powers and responsibilities to elected commune councils. This decision reflects the political will to strengthen local democracy and promote participation in decisions affecting the needs of the local community. In fact, it allows citizens to better assume responsibility in developing their own area.

In their mandate, the commune councils faced many challenges. Nevertheless, a promising step has been taken towards building a young democracy. These experiences have provided lessons that will be useful for the second mandate of the commune councils.

This document provides a view of decentralization which the Khmer Institute of Democracy (KID) gained by training commune councils and observing their work. The commune councils' achievements in this first mandate were remarkable, given the challenges they encountered, which included the lack of human resources, funds, and technical expertise.

The Khmer Institute of Democracy hopes that this survey will contribute to improving the implementation of decentralization in the second mandate of the commune councils.

The Institute would like to express its profound thanks to the Konrad Adenauer Foundation for its financial and counselling support in the training of commune councillors and women candidates of the next commune elections, as well as in the research and printing of this survey. KID would also like to thank the commune councillors who cooperated with the Institute in training programs and in interviews for this survey, as well as other contributors especially Ms. Maria Fosnaes and Ms. Sabine Hofer from Aalborg University, Denmark, who participated in the creation of this document.

Dina Nay
Executive Director
Khmer Institute of Democracy

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this report is to evaluate the functioning of the commune councils in Cambodia and the performance of the commune councillors during their first five year mandate. This evaluation is extensive and is the result of a broad approach which looks at several areas. Due to time constraints and in view of an existing general evaluation of the work of the commune councils by the National Committee for Support to Communes/Sangkats¹, our focus was limited to the five topics outlined below. These areas were chosen because they are not given prominence in the evaluation of the National Committee for Support to Communes/Sangkats. It is our wish that this evaluation will realistically focus on the performance of the Cambodian commune councils. The results presented here are based on data collected in the capital Phnom Penh, as well as in Kampot and Takeo provinces. These provinces were chosen because of the long-standing cooperative relationship between the Khmer Institute of Democracy and communes in these provinces.

This evaluation revolves around the following five topics:

1. Roles, duties and responsibilities of the commune councils
2. Capacity and ability in the process of implementing decentralization
3. Structure and administrative performance of the commune councils
4. People's participation and understanding of the decentralization process
5. The socio-economic development plan - process and progress

For each topic, the challenges the commune councils face and the impact the process of decentralization has had on them, will be investigated. We hope to gain a better understanding of how the decentralization process is proceeding. The aim of the analysis has been to arrive at general recommendations regarding decentralization in Cambodia.

1. Data Collection

The topics of the evaluation are very closely connected to people's understanding of decentralization. The research team decided to focus on qualitative data gained through in depth interviews with commune councillors. The team conducted 9 interviews in Phnom Penh, and 18 interviews in the

¹The National Committee for Support to Communes/Sangkats (May 2005): Review of Decentralization Reform in Cambodia: Policy and Practices (Unofficial Translation).

provinces, totalling 27 in depth interviews. The team allowed more than one councillor per commune/Sangkat to express his/her views on the work of the council. It was decided to give questionnaires to three councillors per commune instead of only interviewing the commune chief. A total of 68 questionnaires were completed by councillors. To gauge the public's knowledge of commune council activity, 271 surveys were conducted with members of the public in Phnom Penh, Takeo, and Kampot Provinces. The evaluation data combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to generate as much knowledge as possible within the boundaries of the time constraints and in the face of dealing with fairly reluctant councillors and members of the public. Because the participants were guaranteed anonymity, the names of the councillors and the communes/Sangkats where interviews were conducted, will not be made public. Instead, each commune and Sangkat involved is numbered in chronological order.

2. The Interviews With the Councillors

Nine interviews were conducted in Phnom Penh, only two of which were conducted with ordinary councillors. The others were Sangkat chiefs. In both cases, the chiefs were not available due to other commitments. Two of the nine interviewed councillors were women, one of them was the chief of her Sangkat.

The invitations for interviews addressed to the rural communes did not specify who the team wanted to interview. Rather, they asked for an interview with "the councillors". As a result, the respondents represent the elite of rural political life: all were male and members of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP). In only two communes, were interviews conducted with the first and second deputy commune chiefs (commune 6) and ordinary members (commune 15). All other interview partners were chiefs of their commune councils who were, in some communes, accompanied by ordinary members not contributing to the conversation. Interview 12, however, represented a deviation from this pattern: the 78 year old commune chief and two members were present. The former led the conversation and the members contributed to the debate.

3. The Councillors' Questionnaires

At the end of the interview sessions with the commune councillors, the research team distributed questionnaires to three members of each of the councils who may or may not have taken part in the interview. In total, 68 questionnaires were collected. Most councillors are members of CPP, around 8 percent from FUNCINPEC, and around 16 percent from the Sam Rainsy Party. Only six

female councillors filled out the questionnaires, reflecting the general trend that relatively few women are involved in commune politics.

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Male	55	80.90
	Female	6	8.80
	Total	61	89.70
Missing	Missing	7	10.30
Total		68	100.00

Table 1: Gender distribution

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	FUNCINPEC	5	7.40
	CPP	48	70.60
	SRP	10	14.70
	Total	63	92.60
Missing	Missing	5	7.40
Total		68	100.00

Table 2: Party

4. The People's Questionnaires

While the councillors were being interviewed, the KID program officer distributed questionnaires to randomly chosen citizens in the streets of the Sangkat/communes. In the provinces, he was assisted by KID's provincial partners.

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Male	152	56.10
	Female	105	38.70
	Total	257	94.80
Missing	Missing	14	5.20
Total		271	100.00

Table 3: Gender distribution

The questionnaires were filled out by 271 people: 91 in Kampot, 90 in Takeo, and 90 in Phnom Penh. 152 of these citizens were men, 105 women.

ROLES, DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The aim of the questions related to this topic was to determine whether the councils fully understood their tasks and duties as laid out in the legal framework. The interviewing team was especially interested in how the councillors saw their tasks and what their understanding of decentralization was.

Most councillors interviewed said that councils had two basic tasks to fulfil: first, to represent the people in their commune, and second to act as an agent of the state (e.g. to carry out state tasks such as registering people to vote). This information was consistent with the tasks as defined by the Cambodian government.

Some councillors also gave practical examples of their work. The councillor interviewed in commune 2, for example, explained that the most important task of the council was to develop the community. In some councils, each councillor was in charge of a different area. In commune 5, the chief's task was to communicate with the people. The chief of commune 14 stated that his task was to lead the people in his commune. These ideas were likely a reflection of the councillors' own understanding of decentralization as being the division of tasks among councillors. These examples contrast the theoretical concepts of serving the people and acting as a state agency.

CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT DECENTRALIZATION

This section examines the councillors' understanding of the legal provisions as spelled out in the March 2001 Law on Administration and Management of Commune/Sangkat. It then looks at the problems the councillors faced, specifically, their need for more training and the councils' lack of financial resources to implement the regulations. The results highlight the different understanding of the legal framework between councillors in the city and in the provinces.

1. Understanding of Legal Framework of Decentralization

In the interviews, the councillors in Phnom Penh showed a good understanding of the basic contents of the legal framework and seemed aware of their tasks and duties. Almost all councillors, for example, were able to explain what the Sangkat's main tasks were, according to the legal framework (i.e. to serve as a state agency and to serve their citizens). In most cases, the description of the councillors' tasks corresponded with the legal framework.

In the provinces, a large number of councillors interviewed, stated that they did not have problems understanding the legal framework. When asked more directly about their difficulties in implementing the rules, most provincial councillors replied that they had had difficulties in this respect and did not properly understand the legal framework. This inconsistency in the replies points toward an inadequate understanding of what the legal framework is. Even though most councillors interviewed had been in local politics for a considerably longer time than the commune council's five year mandate (e.g. as village chiefs), many of them lacked understanding as to how to implement the legal framework on decentralization. This suggests that experience in other positions related to communal management, does not necessarily lead to a good performance as a commune councillor.

Almost all of the councillors interviewed stated that their councils have had problems in implementing the legal framework. A recurring explanation in the interviews was that decentralization was (and still is) new to Cambodia which implies that it will take some time for the councillors to understand its full meaning. The chief of Sangkat 8 compared the situation to a "baby learning how to walk" (Interview 9). The councillors interviewed in communes 11 and 9 stated that even though their councils were facing problems in understanding

the legal framework, the councillors were making progress through training and practical experiences. This is a very positive sign and implies that many of the difficulties councils are facing could be due to the fact that decentralization has been implemented for such a short time. It is also positive that councillors do not seem to despair over the fact that they have had problems with decentralization. They see it rather as a learning process which will eventually lead to decentralization being fully understood and implemented. The councillor of council 2 commented: "We both work and learn." However, some of what was learned may be lost after the next election, as it is expected that new councillors will be elected. They will have to start the learning process all over again.

One obstacle to fully understand decentralization seems to be old age. Some of the councillors interviewed were more than 70 years old and explained that they had problems comprehending both the legal framework and the training. The elderly councillor in commune 18 said: "We do not clearly understand what decentralization is." However, all older councillors interviewed stated that they will run for office again in April 2007. It could therefore be beneficial to consider the older councillors' special needs when designing training sessions, as they are likely to represent a considerable number of councillors in the next mandate.

Only the councillor in commune 5 stated that his commune council did not have problems in comprehending the legal framework. He related this to a book explaining different aspects of decentralization that he had received from an NGO and said that his council would contact their trainers if the book did not provide sufficient information. Providing all councils with handbooks explaining the legal framework and giving advice as to how it is to be implemented could solve many of the existing problems. Councillors would not have to rely entirely on training, especially when they do not have time to attend training sessions without neglecting their daily tasks. Additionally, councillors could consult the handbook when problems arise that have not been dealt with in the training sessions.

2. Training

In connection with the questions regarding the understanding of the legal framework, the people interviewed were asked whether they had received any training concerning the implementation of decentralization. All Sangkat and provincial councillors interviewed had received some training from the Ministry of Interior related to the implementation of the legal framework and

the administration and management of the commune. Most councillors had also received training from other ministries on more specific topics such as domestic violence (e.g. Sangkat 11) or from international organizations/NGOs. The Sangkat chief of Sangkat 3 complained that the training received from the ministry had not been appropriate as older councillors had not been able to follow and understand the training. Some older councillors, especially in the provinces, were not able to recall all the topics they had been trained on (e.g. Interview 15). All of the older councillors from the provinces agreed that the training was not adapted to their needs and learning skills: "We are old so it is difficult for us to remember what we learned" (Interview 12). More training, especially training adapted to the older councillors' special needs, is therefore necessary. According to the chief of Sangkat 4, the training conducted by NGOs tends to be more specific than the government's training (e.g. those with focus on violence or gender). The government's training is focused more on general topics such as the law that created the commune council system.

When asked whether the council required more training, the answer in all interviews was an emphatic *yes*. The councillors see the training they received as very useful but not yet sufficient. The areas that urban councils require training on are mostly in the management and administration of the commune and on the socio-economic development plan. The provincial councillors are interested in receiving additional training on financial management and administration and on the development plan (e.g. Interview 4). Many councillors stated that they had not been sufficiently trained on civil and penal law. They considered this necessary to fulfil their tasks, especially in the context of alternative dispute resolution (e.g. Interview 12). Only the councillor interviewed in commune 11 stated that he would not be in need of additional training.

The Sangkat chief from Sangkat 2 would like his council to be trained on development planning and on the roles and duties as specified in the legal framework. Many Sangkat chiefs stated that they would like to receive training on how to access additional funds from both the government and other organizations (e.g. Commune 3). The chief of Sangkat 10 was from the only Sangkat involved in the interview process that receives funding solely from the government. He would like to be trained by NGOs on how to write project proposals to receive additional funding. The councillors want both general training (legal framework and administration of Sangkat/commune) and more specific training (development planning, access to funds). However, some councillors interviewed emphasized that attending training keeps them away from performing their daily tasks in the commune. To solve this problem, the chief of Sangkat 4 recommended organizing the training into short sessions,

for example only one day a month. When planning training units, it should therefore be remembered that councillors also have to fulfil public service functions.

Land disputes were the topics most councillors in the provinces were trained on, one of the biggest problems in the Cambodian countryside. One councillor visited a model commune in Kampong Cham province on a KID study trip and found the visit to be a very useful experience (Interview 3). Organizing trips to model communes for councillors could be a very valuable experience so that councillors can see how decentralization is being implemented in a successful way. To see a practical example can help to relate theory (i.e. the legal framework) to practice in the councillors' own communes.

While the councillors did find the training useful, they also recommended that others receive training on the operations of the commune council. Many councillors find the people's lack of interest in communal affairs to be very frustrating and an impediment to their work and the potential developmental possibilities. Training of the people is likely to be too extensive a task for NGOs or the government to fulfil. Perhaps in the councillors' training sessions, a module could be included on how the council could inform the people of their role in decentralization and on how the people could be motivated to participate.

3. Recommendations for Future Training Sessions

In view of the councillors' experiences with the training sessions, the following section presents recommendations for possible future training sessions for the commune councillors.

Needs of Councillors

Training should be adapted to councillors' special needs as much as possible. Old age or a low level of education can make it hard for councillors to fully understand the information provided. In mixed age/education level groups, the trainers' attention should be drawn to interacting with those councillors who might find it more difficult to follow the session. More attention should be placed on involving the councillors in the curricula. They should be more actively included in the choice of the training topics.

Participatory Training Sessions

In general, training sessions will be most effective when they incorporate participatory and interactive cooperative learning techniques. These techniques can improve the retention of information on the part of the trainees and will assure exciting training sessions. This is especially important for training sessions based on training of the trainer pedagogy (TOT). The trainers must model participatory techniques.

Additional Training for Other Groups

Councillors understand that decentralization not only concerns themselves as elected representatives of the people, but also the citizens in their communes. They consider people's and village chiefs' cooperation highly necessary to fulfil their tasks. Most donors and non-governmental organizations do not have the capacity to train these groups. Sessions could be included in the councillors' training that shows possible ways to motivate others to participate in the council's work.

Gender

The low number of female councillors in the communes interviewed shows the need for more training for women on their rights and on democracy. This will not only provide them with the necessary knowledge of decentralization, it will also make them feel more confident about their rights and the possibilities they have. KID conducts seminars promoting the increased participation of women in politics. This effort should be followed up with intense training sessions for newly elected women after April 2007. These sessions should focus on strengthening the abilities of these women so that they can gain influence in the male dominated commune councils.

Model Communes

Visits to model communes can facilitate understanding on how decentralization should be implemented in a practical way. Especially for older and less educated councillors, examining how decentralization has been successfully implemented can prove useful. Learning about other ways of managing communes and funds will encourage them to be innovative.

Finance

Given the fact that councils receive little funding from the government, they need to be trained on how to administer their financial resources in the best possible way. In addition, training on how to access additional funds can prove useful. Councillors need to be made aware of the importance of communicating financial issues to the population, not only to ensure transparency but also to avoid raising hopes which could lead to general disappointment. Further, the issue of seeking money from donors and the population should be raised.

Dispute Resolution

Councillors would benefit from training in civil and penal law and should be encouraged to work with the citizen advisors. The main dispute issue in Cambodia is land. Yet, for the councillors, there are also central problems related to domestic violence and divorce. Both issues should be included in the training sessions.

People's Participation

It could be useful to include training for the councillors on how to assess the people's needs. The training should include issues on people's basic rights and enhance understanding of the importance of people's participation in the day to day work of the council. It is also important to train the councillors on how to deal with indifferent villagers.

The Socio-Economic Development Plan

Training aimed at capacity building should continue in order to prepare councillors for the tasks and challenges of the future. During the first five year mandate, the work with the annual socio-economic development plans has gone well. But the focus of the communes' plans is still very narrow. In the future, great benefit could be achieved for a broader segment of the population by including more plans for the improvement of health care, schools etc.

4. Finance

The councils receive money from three main sources: the government, NGOs and private donations (Table 5), and contributions from the citizens in the communes.

All commune councils interviewed received financial support from the government. However, all of the individuals interviewed declared that these government funds were not sufficient to allow the Sangkat/commune to carry out its duties and to implement its development plan. In Phnom Penh, the majority of Sangkats were successful in their attempts to obtain additional funds for development plans from NGOs and international organizations.

This suggests that external funders view the local government structure as a valid mechanism for carrying out community development projects. This is a positive sign, and bodes well for the legitimacy of the councils as a suitable structure for sustainable development.

Many of the councillors interviewed suggested that methods of obtaining additional funds should be a topic covered at the training sessions. Training in this area could enable Sangkats to improve their financial situation.

All councillors interviewed complained that the funds they received from the government were not sufficient to carry out their tasks. A majority of councillors stated that their commune was only able to carry out some of the projects of the development plan (76.6%) or that the available funds were not sufficient at all to complete projects in a reasonable way (73.4%) (Table 10). It is therefore not surprising that an overwhelming majority of councillors who filled out the questionnaires see the lack of funding as the biggest impediment to fulfilling their tasks and as the biggest obstacle to decentralization in Cambodia (96.9%) (Table 4). This is supported by the qualitative data as well.

The female councillor interviewed in Sangkat 5, for example, explained that the Sangkat does receive money from the government to carry out projects. It does not, however, receive the financial support to carry out more extensive projects like building a bigger road. This leads to councils concentrating on small (usually infrastructure related) projects.

		Responses	Percent of Cases
What do you consider to be the greatest obstacle to a successful decentralization in Cambodia?	Lack of funding	62	96.30 %
	Lack of people's participation	39	60.90 %
	Lack of support from the government	31	48.40 %
	Other reasons	11	17.20 %
Total		143	

Table 4: What do you consider to be the greatest obstacle to a successful decentralization in Cambodia?

People expect the council to implement a large number of projects in the commune without the council having the financial means to do so (e.g.

Interview 3, 12). This creates the danger that people will be disappointed with the council's performance and will be tempted not to participate in its work anymore. Given the frailty of Cambodia's financial situation, the insufficiency of funds is not likely to be corrected in the near future. Councillors therefore need to learn and be trained on how to manage their funds in the most efficient way.

In our sample, only 31% of councillors receive funds from NGOs (Table 5). In some communes, NGOs carry out their own projects, for example providing education on water and sanitation issues (e.g. Interview 9). One commune councillor complained that NGOs were unwilling to cooperate with the council: "Most NGOs do not want to communicate with us because we are situated in a remote, rural area" (Interview 3).

		Responses N	Percent of Cases
Who gives money to the commune council?	The Government	65	95.60 %
	Different NGO's	21	30.90 %
	World Food Programme	5	7.40 %
	Private donations	27	39.70 %
	Others	7	10.30 %
Total		125	

Table 5: Who gives money to the commune council?

Training councils on how to contact NGOs to find partners for development projects is therefore important, as councils are not provided with enough funds by the government.

All commune councillors interviewed considered it necessary to inform the people on how the money was spent. They were also aware of the legal framework's provision requiring people to participate financially in the projects the council carries out. All the urban councillors interviewed stated that they did not have problems collecting money from the citizens. They would consider the Sangkat projects as their own and be willing to contribute to better living conditions in the Sangkat. Of the provincial councils, only the council of commune 15 had never tried to collect money from the people. This councillor considered collecting money during ceremonies a viable option.

Interestingly, some communes claimed that they did not have problems receiving funds from the people (Interview 5) while others did (e.g. Interview 16). The councillor in commune 13 explained that people were especially unwilling to donate money if the funds were to be used for a project in another village (Interview 13).

Collecting money is seen by the councillors as important not only for financial reasons, but also to build community ownership: "If they pay, then they also take more care of the road. They see that their money is part of that road"

(Interview 7). Some councils do not prescribe how much citizens should pay while others do. Commune 7 for example asks for 1,000 riel per family. Differences can also be found in how the money is collected. In commune 17, it is the village chief's task while in commune 7, the task has been commissioned out.

An important problem raised in connection with the councils' tight financial situation is price gouging. One councillor explained that the "problem is related to the auctions on the development projects. The entrepreneurs agree on a high price and they all offer us this same high price" (Interview 17). This happens in relation to bidding meetings where entrepreneurs agree on a high price thereby forcing councils to carry out much smaller projects than initially planned. This problem is probably due to the councillors' lack of technical expertise and experience in procurement management.

STRUCTURE AND ADMINISTRATION

The aim of the questions on this topic was to understand how Sangkat councils are structured and administered. The interviewing team especially wanted to find out if and how women are integrated into the council structure and what problems they face in politics. The team attempted to understand how the village chiefs contribute to the council's work. As the only political aspect of the interviews, the team tried to find out if clashes between members of different political parties impeded the work of the councils.

1. Female Councillors

Apart from Sangkat 10, all Sangkats have at least one female councillor. The council without a woman councillor has a majority of female village chiefs who are in charge of representing women's and children's affairs. Sangkat 11 has a female chief. The four female councillors in Sangkat 8 are as actively involved in the work of the council as their male counterparts. They are also in charge of informing the people about the council's projects (Interview 8). All the councillors interviewed stated that it was important to have female councillors.

Usually, women councillors are in charge of women's and children's affairs. 91.2% of all councillors who filled in the questionnaire, stated that their council has a special focus on women in their projects. This however, cannot be confirmed by the information gained through the personal interviews. Projects focusing on gender were never mentioned as one of the topics the councils concentrated on.

When asked about how to motivate more women to run for office, one female councillor (Interview 3) explained that women needed to be educated about their rights. That would automatically lead to more women being interested in cooperating with the council or in running for office themselves. It therefore seems to be important that women are trained on their rights. Even if the goal is not directly related to promoting women in politics, this might lead to more women being interested in pursuing such a career.

The female chief of Sangkat 11 explained that the government is now promoting women in politics and that this pushes her to work even harder. She tries to promote more women in politics by explaining to them that they can

learn while they work as a councillor, they do not have to know everything from the beginning.

The female councillor interviewed in Sangkat 5 stated that it is generally more difficult to be a female councillor since they are housewives at the same time. This leads to female councillors having to work much harder than their male counterparts (Interview 5). We understand this to be one of the main explanations for the low number of women in Cambodian local politics. The fact that male councillors lack respect for their female colleagues and do not expect

them to fulfil their duties as well as men do, is also a problem. This opinion seems to be shared by the majority of the councillors interviewed. The reason most often given (75% of all councillors) for why so few women are involved in politics is that they lack confidence (Table 6) – a condition that can be changed through training.

		Responses N	Percent of Cases
Why are there not more women councillors?	Party politics	14	35.00 %
	Women are not qualified for the job	10	25.00 %
	Women do not have enough time if they are married and have children	17	42.50 %
	Women are not confident enough to run for office	22	55.00 %
	Husbands do not allow their wives to run for office	11	27.50 %
	Other reasons	11	27.50 %
Total		85	

Table 6: Why are there not more women councillors?

When asked why women represent such a small percentage of councillors, 55% of the respondents declared that women were not confident enough to run for office. Training women on their rights and the possibilities they have in communal politics, as well as organizing meetings between female citizens and female councillors, is likely to increase women's confidence and may therefore lead to more women running for office. Councillors assume that women do not have enough time for the work (42.5%). Party politics seem to play an important role as well: 35% of all councillors who filled out the questionnaire see the parties' reluctance to put women in high positions as one reason why women are underrepresented in the councils.

In the rural provinces, there were very few female councillors and none were interviewed. Some councils had no female councillor at all. However, the councils were all assisted by a woman who was either a volunteer or hired by the council (for a salary ranging from 30,000 to 40,000 Riel/month). These women were in charge of women's and children's affairs and attended the

monthly meetings of the council. Projects regarding gender mostly addressed domestic violence and education in reproductive health (Interview 3).

In communes where women are not represented in the commune councils, hiring a woman to represent her gender might be the best solution to ensure that women's affairs are taken into consideration in local politics. The woman performing this task can learn about decentralization, how to promote her own ideas, and how to be more confident in her interactions with male councillors and the people in the commune. In the best case scenario, this could lead to these women running for office in April 2007 and being placed in a relatively high position on the party list if they have performed their task appropriately and efficiently.

2. Cooperation Between the Parties

The research focused primarily on the functioning of the commune councils, and did not specifically draw attention to political issues. This section only briefly outlines the interactions between the political parties. All councils where interviews were conducted were composed of more than one party. The chief in all councils was a member of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP). The majority of the councillors interviewed stated that the cooperation between the parties worked well and that there were no problems connected to party politics. When asked about the reasons for the good cooperation, the answers centred mainly on four explanations. First, all councillors wanted to serve the citizens in their council. Even when the councillors belonged to different parties, they all shared this goal (Interview 8, Interview 9). Second, some councillors stated that there were no problems because each councillor had his/her clearly assigned task. The chief of Sangkat 4 explained that problems could be overcome because the commune had "one" chief solving problems between members of different parties. Third, some councillors declared that there were problems between councillors belonging to different parties but they disappeared once the councillors got to know each other (e.g. Interview 2). Fourth, many councillors mentioned that council members have to follow internal regulations that impose sanctions when councillors do not respect the rules, or do not fulfil their tasks. Sanctions included, for example, being reported to higher political authorities (Interview 10).

One questionnaire filled out by a member of the Sam Rainsy Party sheds a little more light on the cooperation between the parties. The councillor explained: "There is still political discrimination against opposing ideas." A statement made by a CPP councillor during an interview also shows that the

cooperation and understanding between the parties is not as smooth as suggested by the interviewed councillors. When asked about the cooperation between the parties, one councillor replied: "So for us in CPP the cooperation is not a problem but for the others it is difficult. The two others lack knowledge and only understand a little from the training they received" (Interview 3).

Because the research team deliberately avoided discussing political topics and was only able to interview councillors who were members of CPP, it was impossible to gain additional information on this subject.

3. Cooperation with the Village Chief

The councillors seem to appreciate the village chief's help as they kept underlining his/her importance. The importance that the council attached to the village chief makes it advisable to also train the village chiefs on decentralization and especially on development planning.

Cooperation between the council and the village chiefs was seen as very important by all councillors interviewed: "Without the help of the village chief, the council could not perform its duties" (Interview 14). He/she is a key person because he/she lives closest to the people and is therefore best suited to collect information from the people (Interview 1). Information collected by the village chief included the needs relating to the development plan and information on administrative issues such as the possession of ID cards (Interview 6). The councillors and the village chiefs also cooperated on more specific issues such as security or agriculture (Interview 9). In commune 17, the councillor interviewed stated that the council was only able to improve the security situation with the help of the village chiefs (Interview 17). In Sangkat 3, the council met with the village chiefs once a month. In some communes, the village chief represented the people of his/her village in the council's monthly meeting (Interview 3).

The village chief is usually informed about the council's decisions and passes the information on to the citizens (Interview 4). The village chief thereby acts as an intermediary between the council and the citizens. Some councils also relied on the village chief to inform the people about the council's meetings (Interview 5). In most communes, the village chiefs attend the council's monthly meetings. In commune 17, the council does not invite the people to attend the monthly meetings. Instead, the village chiefs attend, serving as representatives of the people. At the same time, the councils assist the village

chiefs in their work. The councillor interviewed in commune 3 stated that it can be a problem for the village chief to get people to attend village meetings as he/she is not able to give presents to the people. In these cases, the council provides the people with presents (Interview 3).

The cooperation between the village chiefs and the council is not always unproblematic. The village chiefs were not present at the meetings of all councils. The village chiefs in commune 12 did not attend every meeting as they did not have enough time (Interview 12). One commune faced more severe problems. The village chiefs ignored the council and did not cooperate: "We give them tasks and they do not do them. I can only think that they do not know how to do them. We want training for them" (Interview 11).

The cooperation with higher administrative units is also not necessarily positive, even if councils are not able to implement decentralization properly without the help of the government. The councillor of commune 10 complained that the military police would not inform the council about their actions in the commune: "The government does not respect us" (Interview 10). This quotation highlights the perception of this commune councillor that the police and military – rather than the elected officials – represent the government. While this is erroneous, it does highlight the complex power relations that exist at the local level.

4. Dispute Resolution

Everyone interviewed stated that they did not have the competency to serve as judges when compromises could not be reached by the parties. When this happens, the parties are sent to court. All councillors interviewed stated that their council is practicing alternative dispute resolution. The goal is to find a compromise instead of having people take revenge on each other (Interview 8). Some communes have a commission to take care of problems (e.g. Interview 2, 11: with elderly people, the commune village chiefs and the monks). In others it is the chief's or deputy chiefs' task to advise people (Interview 8, 9). The trend was similar at the Sangkat level. In Sangkat 4 for example, the second deputy chief deals with dispute resolution.

When asked which conflicts were most common in the commune, the majority of councillors mentioned land disputes and domestic violence. The councillor interviewed in commune 1 reminded us that land disputes are one of the biggest problems Cambodia is facing at the moment (Interview 1).

Councillors are not able to solve every problem the people in their commune are facing. If the problem is too serious, councillors advise the parties to go to court (Interview 3). At the same time, people are encouraged to find a solution in collaboration with the council as trials can turn out to be very expensive (Interview 7). One problem is that people do not always respect and follow the advice of the councillors. The councillor interviewed in commune 12 for example complained that the council was able to only solve a few disputes, as people would not listen to the councillors' advice (Interview 12). Interestingly, some councillors stated that there were hardly any problems in their communes. Given the fact that domestic violence is a widespread problem in Cambodia, this is hardly credible. The fact that the public appeals to the council for mediation is a sign that the councillors are respected members of the community.

PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION

Decentralization requires a high level of participation by the people. If the citizens are passive and do not participate, it will not be possible to successfully implement the decentralization of political power in Cambodia. That is the reason why information relating to participation is crucial for an understanding of the current state of the decentralization reform process. The following section examines if and how people participate in the Sangkat/commune meetings, what the councillors think about it, and where it is necessary to improve the cooperation between the elected and the “normal” citizens. The evaluation also considers the physical space for people's participation. The communes are required by law to include the villagers in their work and in many cases they make a great effort to do so. However, if the physical conditions for doing so are not acceptable, they may have a hard time achieving this goal. If for example the council is meeting far away from people's homes, this might have a negative effect on attracting people to the meetings.

1. Interview Findings - People's Participation

For the evaluation of their daily work, tasks and the problems they encountered, commune councillors were asked a series of questions related to the people's participation. The most interesting findings are presented and compared with the quantitative findings obtained through the questionnaires. In general terms, it can be stated that most councils found it difficult to mobilize the villagers to participate in the process of decentralization.

There are two different ways in which the people actually participate in the work of the council.

- a) They donate money for development activities. The councillors typically go from house to house and try to get people to donate as much as they can afford. There seems to be a general consensus on the fact that poor people are not able to give much or maybe nothing at all. “We raise money from the people. If they pay, then they also take more care of the road. They see that their money is part of that road” (Interview 7). From this statement we see that the benefits of collecting money from the people are twofold: the money helps to build the road and it also makes people feel more responsible for it so that they take better care of it, thus diminishing the need for

maintenance. The government requires that the community contribute 10% of the cost of the development project before the government will provide the remainder.

- b) People attend meetings in relation to the work on the socio-economic development plan once a year. Here, they can contribute ideas and express their desires about new projects. Some councils have quotas regarding the number of people who must participate. Other councils just hope for as many people as possible to join the meetings. “Every year we make a new plan, so one year one plan. It is a rule that at least one member of each family has to participate” (Interview 9). In relation to the socio-economic development plan, the commune councils have fewer problems getting people to participate than usual. In some Sangkats, councillors try to include all interested citizens. To achieve this they might, for example, hold meetings outside so that everyone coming by can hear what is being discussed, sit down, and participate (Interview 8).

Many commune councillors interviewed expressed concern and frustration on the lack of interest of the people. The problem of getting people involved may arise for a variety of reasons. Often, councillors believe that people have no interest in the work of the councillors: “People do not care much about the commune council. They only care about their businesses” (Interview 4). In another interview, a councillor stated: “People do not care about the information on the announcement board. They only care about their living situation” (Interview 3). One chief also complained, but he attributed the problems to the councillors and their abilities: “The councillors do not have enough capacity and the people ignore the work of the council. The people tell us: Do what you want to, we do not care” (Interview 14). Some councillors mentioned that it is difficult to motivate people to participate. The reasons for this lack of participation are mostly attributed to the fact that either people are poor, have no interest in participating, or they are very busy with their work. In one Sangkat, there is no cooperation with people other than the village chiefs taking part in the meetings (Interview 7).

Other councillors touched upon the capabilities of the people who actually attend the meetings: “During the meetings not many people attend. Even if they come, they have no ideas. The women helping the council and the village chiefs attend, however. We invite the people from the villages when we discuss the socio-economic development plan. Otherwise they do not attend. (...) I divided the people into two groups [at a meeting], men and women, but they still had no ideas” (Interview 15). As suggested here, simply attending the

meetings is not enough to guarantee meaningful participation. It is also important to focus on people's ability to actually take part in the decision making process. Often, a simple invitation to attend a meeting is not enough to make people come. The councils use different approaches to attract people to the meetings. One option two councils have made use of, is to give food as gifts: "More poor people participate in our meetings than people with money. This is because of the presents we give them. The rich people do not need these presents, so they have no incentive to attend" (Interview 3). Another, even more innovative method is explained by the following: "We invite people to attend the meetings. When we do that, we give them a piece of paper with a number on it. At the meeting we have a lottery. That way we can get more people to participate. It works" (Interview 4). From these statements we see that many councillors are willing to try alternative methods to get the villagers involved. However, this compensation model for participation is not a good trend because it mirrors the problems associated with offering compensation for attending a political party event or for voting in a specific way in an election.

Another way of fulfilling the requirement of people's participation has been to select *additional*² representatives of the people, for example, one for the muslims (Cham), women, or elderly. These representatives are then invited to the meetings with the council instead of all the villagers: "They are the ones who know most about the group they are supposed to represent" (Interview 1). Sometimes the representatives are elected by the people and sometimes by the council. The reasons for inviting representatives instead of all villagers vary. An example from one of the interviews shows: "We have chosen to invite only representatives and not all the people. They are busy and do not have time for us" (Interview 5).

Several Sangkats also utilize this people's representative model. This is seen as a practical solution to the requirement of participation (Interview 9), though it is alarming to see that the public are not welcome to attend the meetings.

Another declaration of a commune chief further highlights the difficulties that the commune councils have in ensuring participation: "Another issue is the participation of the people. They do not donate a lot of money. Our biggest problem is the lack of people's participation... The people do not care, they do not want to get involved" (Interview 11).

² Additional: because the councillors are also supposed to act as representatives of the people.

Despite the many problems connected to participation mentioned by the councillors, there are also positive indications. One councillor stated that it is now easier to get people to participate than it was five years ago (Interview 18). Another commune chief explained that the people who participate understand the decentralization process, the rest (those who do not attend) do not. This shows that there is progress. People are getting more accustomed to the idea of actually being allowed to contribute to local governance. The success of people's participation may well rest on the results of the commune council's performance. If promised projects are not initiated or not completed as planned, people will lose faith in the ability of the council to improve the status quo and will then feel that their input and participation are not yielding any results.

2. Quantitative Findings - People's Views on Participation

The following paragraphs focus on the views of the people on their own role in relation to the Sangkats/communes and the decentralization process.

The questionnaires show that 63.1% of the people have heard about the work of the commune council (table 7). This is a fairly high percentage. In addition, 94.1% of the people know where the commune office is located (table d). So even the ones who have not heard about the work of the council know where they can go for information if they wish to do so. Almost half (48%) of the people said that they have been invited to participate in a commune council meeting (table e).

The goal however, should be to make everyone aware of the fact that they have the right to go if they wish to. 88.5% of the people say that they would like to know more about the work of the council (table g). This is a very positive sign and the councillors should try to use this interest of the people to promote the council's work.

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Yes	166	63.10
	No	97	36.90
	Total	263	100.00
Missing	Missing	8	
Total		271	

Table 7: Have you heard about the work of the commune council?

There are indications that the people are somewhat disappointed about the performance of their commune council. 21.5% stated that the council did not initiate any projects to improve their life during this first five year period.

A further 30.2% do not trust the council to use the money well to help the community (table 8). This mistrust poses a serious obstacle to the successful cooperation between the two groups: the councillors and the people.

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Yes	180	69.80
	No	78	30.20
	Total	258	100.00
Missing	Missing	13	
Total		271	

Table 8: Do you trust that the council will use the money well to help the community?

Nevertheless, one can also find more positive statistics. It is for example, a good sign that 35.4% of the people participated in one or more commune council meetings and a further 91.9% replied that the council is there to help the people.

The conclusion on the topic of people’s participation is that the training should be more focused on alternative ways of getting the people involved, than on stating the mere fact that people have a legal right to participate. Visits to “best practice” Sangkats/communes could be a powerful tool in this connection.

3. Quantitative Findings – Councillors' Views on Participation

The councillors were asked if they thought that people had the right to participate in the meetings of the council. Here the result was overwhelmingly positive with 97% saying “yes”. This underlines the impression gained from the interviews that the councillors are very much aware of the participatory role of the people.

Another point touched upon was how the councillors inform people about their decisions. The importance of the village chief, which was described previously, is again highlighted. All the councillors stated that they use the village chief to inform the people about the work of the council. Other popular means to get the message to the villagers was to personally invite them to meetings or to use the notice board. The widespread use of a notice board is not surprising as the councillors are required by law to use it as a means of communication.

In the quantitative questionnaires, 89.4% of the councillors stated that the

reason that people do not attend was they do not have time because there is too much work to do. Another popular reason for not attending was that people were simply not interested in the work of the council. 45.5% of the councillors are of this opinion (Table 9). 27.3% of the councillors state that the biggest obstacle to successful decentralization in Cambodia is a lack of participation by the people

		Responses N	Percent of Cases
What do you think the reasons are for people not attending?	No time, too much work	59	89.40
	They are not interested in the work of the commune council	30	45.50
	People lack the necessary understanding of politics	29	43.90
	People are too scared	8	12.10
	People are not invited	10	15.20
	Other reasons	14	21.20
Total		150	

Table 9: What do you think the reasons are for people not attending?

The socio-economic development plan is one aspect of the commune where participation actually works. In the questionnaires, 95% of the councillors stated that the people participated in the work on the development plan and this indication was supported by the interview statements.

When analyzing the results from the councillor’s questionnaires, we found the results from the interviews to be confirmed and we also found surprising new information.

All participating councillors said that people have a right to participate in the meetings of the commune council. This supports the conclusion from the interviews that the councillors know the law concerning people’s participation. However, when we look at whether or not they are actually implementing this law properly, the picture is not quite as positive. Nearly all (98%) of the councils invite people through informing the village chief, while 85% use personal invitations and 70% use the poster board (Table 10).

		Responses N	Percent of Cases
Participate	Posters/The notice board	47	70.10
	Through the village chief	66	98.50
	By personal invitation	57	85.10
	Other means	2	32.80
Total		192	

Table 10: How do you encourage the people in your commune to participate?

The councillors assume that those responsible for the development of the community are the commune council, the village chief, and the people in their totality. Far fewer councillors believe that this responsibility rests on NGOs or the United Nations. This finding corresponds with other results and strengthens the impression that councillors actually are interested in input and suggestions from the people.

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLAN

All councils visited had begun carrying out their own socio-economic development plans. The plan is normally renewed once a year. The councils generally included input from the people, specially during the elaboration phase. The councils receive an amount of money from the government each year dependent on the size of the commune and its population. Part of the money is supposed to be used to carry out small scale development projects in villages and local communities. In addition, people have to contribute financially to the projects, thus providing the opportunity for people to see the direct results of their contributions in the community. “We go to people’s houses to discover their needs and then develop the plan based on this. We have a commission in charge of this. (...) The people have to contribute 10-15% of the project costs” (Interview 2).

1. Qualitative Findings Concerning the Socio-Economic Development Plan

This section focuses on the results of the qualitative interviews with the councillors. It summarizes how the councillors understand the work on the socio-economic development plan and the results they have achieved during the first mandate.

The process of developing the plan was the same in many of the councils interviewed and is based on the eleven steps towards the plan elaborated by the government: “We have a five year plan focusing on economics, social affairs, environmental affairs, administrative affairs and gender. We gave people some paper and asked them to write down what they want us to do. Once we have all the information, we have to prioritize which road to build first. People participate [in the work with the development plan] because they have an interest in getting better roads because it is then easier to transport their products” (Interview 4).

- 1) In the first stage the commune council holds a meeting to discuss possible projects that need attention and the funds available in the commune. This gives the councillors their initial ideas.
- 2) After this opening stage, the councillors or the village chiefs seek advice and wishes from the people. The way this is done varies from commune to commune. In some communes, the council has a

commission in charge of developing the plan. The commission will then ask the people about their problems and ask for suggestions for improvement. Often, this process is initiated by inviting interested people and the village chief for another meeting.

- 3) The ideas from this meeting are then fed back to the commune council and are prioritized by the councillors, sometimes in cooperation with the village chiefs.

Another typical example of the most common way to approach the process of developing the socio-economic development plan, similar to the one presented above, is described by a commune chief in interview 5: “The socio-economic development plan is developed at meetings attended by the council, the village chiefs, representatives of the people and a volunteer from the community. After that, we go to the people and ask them what we can do. They write their suggestions on a piece of paper and the suggestions are prioritized. We try to tell the people that every road built is for the whole community. Most people understand this and donate some money” (Interview 5).

Most development plans elaborated by the commune councils focus on infrastructure and wells. This reflects the people's needs and wishes. The socio-economic development plans of all urban Sangkats where interviews were conducted have a special focus on infrastructure and sewage. It is interesting that roads and sewage always seem to be the topics councillors find most important. In many councils, councillors can state the precise number of roads they have constructed. They say that the new roads have made life easier for the people living in the Sangkat.

It is possible that the councils like to build roads and sewers because the people can see the immediate results of their contributions. This improves the credibility of the council. Good roads are also a status symbol and visible to everyone. A commune with a well functioning infrastructure is considered prosperous and successful in the eyes of others. Besides this, building a road is easy to organise. It is a question of hiring a contractor and enjoying the result after a fairly short period of time. It might be a more challenging task to fight crime or stop domestic violence. Also, if roads are not in proper condition, then the councils will face floods after heavy rains. This makes it more difficult for people to do their business in the area.

In general, it can be stated that all councillors consider themselves satisfied with the results they have achieved. They acknowledge that they often do not achieve all the initiatives they set out to do, but mostly this is attributed to a lack of funding or a lack of the people's participation. Their own performance

and role is rarely put into question. Interview 1 for example states that there has been considerable progress in the community of this commune council. They have built schools, a more central market and better roads. “It is because the plan comes from the people now. It is the plan of the commune council and not just initiatives decided from above” (Interview 1).

Even though most councillors have achieved some results, they still face different problems in relation to their work on the socio-economic development plan. “People get upset if we improve one road, but not all the other bad roads as well. (...) If the people have new roads, they do not say that a new street gives hope.”

Sometimes there is a big difference between the major problems of the commune and the focus of the development plan. We talked to one councillor who throughout the interview, returned to the security problems that his Sangkat is facing. However, when we asked him what their development plans focused on, he replied “roads and sewers”. We confronted him on the security problems, but he stated that security, unlike roads, was not a question of money and investment (Interview 10). In another council we asked why the plan focused on roads and sewers, if the community's main problems were poverty and security issues. The reply was: “That is only the first step in our work to fight poverty. What will be the next step? We do not know as we are at the end of the mandate” (Interview 7).

That said, many councillors have a genuine wish to make a difference and they become frustrated if they are not able to fulfil the needs and wishes of the people. “The people need much, so we cannot fulfil all their needs. Some people complain if the road is not built in front of their own house” (Interview 5).

An ever recurring issue for the councillors are the financial problems they are facing. All the councillors interviewed mentioned this topic one way or another. “I cannot say that the money from the government is not enough, but if they gave us more, it would be better. If we are successful one year, then they give us more money the next year and so forth. But if we are not successful, they take away the money again” (Interview 7).

Another commune chief focused on the problem of collecting money from the people: “In our socio-economic development plan we focus on security, agriculture and cultural education. One problem is the people’s participation in finance. We cannot encourage the people to pay. The people ignore us when we ask them for money” (Interview 10). This aspect might also make it more

difficult for the councillors to launch long term development efforts as those will usually be more costly and it will perhaps take several years before visible results appear.

All the councillors interviewed have received training on how to elaborate the socio-economic development plan but it is still one of the areas where several of them mention that more training is needed. A concrete problem, mentioned by one of the chiefs, relates to the auctions that the councils hold. Here the councillors lack the technical expertise to assess the quality of the work they have ordered. It therefore sometimes happens that companies build a road of very poor quality and two years later it is ruined and needs to be repaired. (Interview 17).

The following interesting observation from the interviews helps to illustrate how the decentralization process has in fact marked a change in the Cambodian way of implementing local development projects: “We work based on the suggestions of the people. We focus on agriculture and building roads. The people help with building an irrigation channel in town, but we cannot force them to build the channel as in previous times [i.e. during the Khmer Rouge period]. It is their own choice now “(Interview 9). This clearly shows that the voice of the people has gained strength. Their voice might still be weak, but most of the councils seem open to people who want to give their input and ideas.

2. Quantitative Findings for the Councillors

The work with the socio-economic development plan is something all councillors have received training on. Almost all (87%) councillors are satisfied with the result of the implementation of the plan and describe it as successful (Table 11).

		Responses N	Percent of Cases
Valid	Successful. We have achieved a good result,	47	87.00
	Difficult, but in the end we managed to finish the plan	4	7.40
	Other statements	3	5.60
	Total	54	100.00
	Missing	14	
Total		68	

Table 11: How would you describe the work with the socio-economic development plan?

In the questionnaires, the councillors were asked, who has the responsibility for the development of their community? The most common replies with almost the same frequencies were “the commune council”, “the village chief” and “the villagers”. This shows that councillors acknowledge that all three parties have a role to play and that development must start from the communities themselves. The commune councillors know that it is not the government alone which will provide development to the community. The other question posed in relation to the socio-economic development plan related to the scope of the initiated projects. We wanted to find out what the councillors had actually chosen to focus on, during this first five year mandate. As the councillors were allowed to choose more than one issue in their reply, the results are not clear. However, the main topic was “road building and reconstruction” which all the councillors mentioned.

This supports the impression given in the interviews. Building roads is seen as a direct way of improving people’s living conditions, because it makes it a lot easier for people to get to school and for farmers to sell their products at the nearby markets (Table 12). However, it is possible that some communities would also benefit from varying development initiatives, taking into consideration alternative ways of raising the quality of life among the villagers.

		Responses N	Percent of Cases
What have the projects you initiated been centred on?	Road building and reconstruction	64	97.00
	Education and literacy, including school building	50	75.80
	Improvement of health issues	58	87.90
	Improvement of women's issues	55	83.30
	Other things	19	28.80
Total		246	

Table 12: What have the projects you initiated been centred on?

3. People's Views on the Socio-Economic Development Plan

In a vote of confidence, people in the provinces stated that the presence of the commune council has made an impact (Table 13). 40.1% stated that the council has made a big difference in terms of the development of the community. 53% acknowledged that the council made a small difference but that they would like to see more projects initiated in the next mandate. 7% of the participants in the quantitative evaluation said that the council made no difference at all to their lives. According to somewhat contradictory data, 51.9% of the respondents said that they had never heard of the socio-economic

development plan (Table 14). However, compared to the other results we have presented, this high number may be due to the fact that people have not heard the name of the plan. On the other hand, it may represent a biased response in that members of the public do not want to speak ill of their local governance structure.

The councillors have embraced the “socio-economic development plan” and have accepted it as an important tool to guide the work of their councils and improve the living standard in the communities. Those who carry out the planning collect ideas from the people, but do not consistently use them to determine the content of the work they do. Therefore, one sees a large number of projects focused on building roads and sewage systems, while the needs of the community are more diverse and complex. It is clear that some of these communes struggle with very serious issues such as security, drug abuse (especially in the urban area) and poverty. However, successful projects aimed at combating these problems are more difficult to achieve and therefore it is easier to build roads. This can have a motivating effect on both the councillors and the donating people. The research team recommends training the councillors on how to expand community development projects.

		Responses N	Percent of Cases
Do you think the commune council is making a difference in the development of your community?	Yes, they have made a big difference.	115	40.10
	A small difference, but I would like them to initiate more projects	152	53.00
	No, nothing has changed	20	7.00
Total		287	100.00

Table 13: Do you think the commune council is making a difference in the development of your commune?

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Yes	117	48.10
	No	126	51.90
	Total	243	100.00
Missing	Missing	28	
Total		514	

Table 14: Have you heard anything about a socio-economic development plan?

CONCLUSION

The interviews conducted, as well as the questionnaires filled out by the councillors, have given us information about the state of the implementation of decentralization, in both urban and rural areas of Cambodia. We are now able to see some trends that appear in many or all Sangkats/communes where interviews were conducted. It is not possible to draw nation-wide conclusions based on this data, due to the sample size and the impossibility of choosing a representative sample.

In Phnom Penh, councillors are generally aware of their duties. They know that they are supposed to perform the tasks delegated to them by the central authorities and serve the people living in their communes by meeting their needs and promoting their development. At the same time, councillors find the decentralization process very challenging and beyond their capabilities and capacities. They have considerable difficulty understanding how to perform their duties. Further training in all relevant fields (both general and specific) is therefore of primary importance.

The representatives of the councils we interviewed regarded their task of contributing to the commune's development as very important. They had drafted socio-economic development plans and had varying levels of success in implementing them. Interestingly, most projects concentrated on infrastructure (building roads/sewage systems). These projects usually benefit the already slightly better off while the very poor hardly profit from these plans at all. It is therefore of utmost importance to try to include the needs of the very poor in communal development planning.

Many of the councillors interviewed explained: implementing the relevant legal framework is difficult because decentralization is new to Cambodia. This is a very promising outlook as it shows that councillors expect to learn by doing. Councillors in general expect that problems will slowly disappear as decentralization moves into its next five year period. Donors and non-governmental organizations involved in training are seen as having the task of helping councillors master their problems and become better acquainted with the legal framework. A second impediment to a full and fruitful implementation of decentralization is the councils' tight financial situation. Here again, partner organizations are asked to support councils, either in providing funds or in showing ways to access additional funds. In addition, councillors rely on cooperation with the village chiefs to fulfil their tasks. This

implies that councillors are aware of their limitations and acknowledge that decentralization can only be implemented successfully if partnerships are created.

Local power relations still play an important role in the communes surveyed. Most councillors interviewed have been in local politics since the 1980s. The predominance of male councillors shows that women are still disadvantaged in provincial local politics – for whatever reason. At the same time, CPP represents the leading political party, and is the party of which every chief, in the communes where we conducted interviews, is a member. The lack of female councillors, as well as the lack of a strong opposition party could very well lead to one-sided politics. More research needs to be done to find out to what degree projects implemented by the council represent the needs and wishes of a particularly strong group within the commune.

One of the very positive elements concerning people's participation is that they have embraced the idea of a socio-economic development plan. All councillors have stated that it has been easy to get the people to participate in working on this plan. Many have attended the meetings and have contributed ideas concerning the projects they would like to have implemented in their neighbourhoods. Furthermore, several councillors have decided to make people contribute financially to the projects. People often seem willing to give a contribution and donate what they can spare.

However, few people from the general public show interest in the everyday management of the commune. For example, councillors complain that people do not understand the importance of registering their children and their marriages. Hardly anyone attends the monthly council meetings. This could also be related to the fact that some councils do not make it clear that people are actually allowed to attend the meetings and to state their opinions. In the future, more attention should be placed on getting the people involved in the development of the communities on a regular basis. Stronger cooperation between the people and the councillors will strengthen the mutual respect between both groups.

Decentralization represents a milestone in Cambodia's young democracy, and the people involved in the process need all available help to guarantee their success.

The Khmer Institute of Democracy (KID) was established as a non-governmental organization (NGO) by a group of Cambodian-Americans on the 6th of October 1992.

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