

JSRP Paper 19

Theories in Practice Series

Social Accountability in Cambodia

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August 2014

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Acknowledgements

The insights provided by this paper would not have been possible without the warm welcome of The Asia Foundation personnel and the strong support from both TAF and LSE representatives. The authors would like to express their gratitude to the JSRP team: Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic for excellent guidance and smooth coordination and Wendy Foulds for extremely efficient logistical support. Many thanks to The Asia Foundation representatives: Silas Everett, the country representative, for supporting us with great organisational hospitality and logistics but also with his personal competences and experience, Gavin Murphy for providing us with good insights into the programme and navigation through its streams and channels. We are particularly grateful to Sopheap Kry for being our most resourceful information support but also for being our main bridge to Cambodian society.

Acronyms

| | |
|-----------|--|
| CBO | Community based organisation |
| CMC | Community Mobilisation Committee |
| CPP | Cambodian People's Party |
| CSO | Civil society organisation |
| DFFG-NSAC | Demand for good governance – Non-state actor component project |
| MOI | Ministry of Interior |
| NGO | Non-governmental organisation |
| PECSA | Project to enhance capacity in social accountability |
| RGoC | Royal Government of Cambodia |
| SA | Social accountability |
| SRP | Sam Rainsy Party |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| UNTAC | United Nations Transitional Authorities in Cambodia |
| TOC | Theory of Change |

Executive Summary

Scope and purpose

- The main focus of this paper is on the Theory of Change (ToC) in the field of promoting social accountability in Cambodia and its application through the Non-State Actor Component (NSAC) of the Demand For Good Governance (DFGG) project which The Asian Foundation (TAF) implemented during 2009-2013 with the support of the World Bank.
- Key objectives are: (i) to review the inherent reasoning, assumptions and logic within the ToC underlying the social accountability project; (ii) to analyse how the theory of change was applied, how it ‘worked’ in practice, (iii) to contribute to the debate on the role of theory of change in development interventions having in mind the findings of this research.
- The approach applied in this research was based on the assumption that the ToC and programme that was analysed represented a limited intervention within a broader time frame and more complex processes of change. It is assumed that the outcomes of the programme’s intervention were determined by these processes, including specific sets of opportunities, risks and constraints.

Methodology

- The starting point of the research was a deconstruction of the ToC and the identification of core and background assumptions. Four core assumptions were found at the base of DFGG-NSAC intervention: (i) increasing the capacities of civil society organisations (CSOs) will enable a more proactive engagement in social accountability actions; (ii) supporting joint social accountability practices of CSOs and local authorities will enhance the capacities of local authorities for social accountability; (iii) supporting CSOs to enhance the capacities of citizens will increase citizen participation in social accountability practices; (iv) supporting CSOs to perform social accountability actions in partnership with state institutions will contribute to good governance. In addition to these, three background assumptions were identified: (i) in a restrictive political environment it is more feasible to promote social accountability at the local level; (ii) to focus on non-confrontational forms of social accountability; (iii) social accountability leads to the gradual introduction of political accountability.
- These assumptions were examined against the reality of the project’s implementation in two components: the quality of education services; and natural resource management in fishing communities. This examination was framed in line with sets of indicators, many of which were more ‘proxy’ indicators in the context of the limited availability of data and qualitative research.

- The data collection methods comprised an analysis of project documentation and interviews with representatives of TAF, CSOs, community-based organisations (CBOs), citizens and local authorities.

Key findings

- The insights into the effectiveness of the implementation of the ToC were limited due to the lack of a precise and robust baseline. In order to produce better insights into the effectiveness of the development of social accountability tools and mechanisms in Cambodia, it would be necessary to have a comprehensive and precise baseline against which the effects of an intervention and the implementation of a ToC could be measured.
- Research findings indicated that, within the four-year time span, beneficiary CSOs have increased their awareness of the concept and forms, tools and mechanisms of social accountability practices, as well as technical and organisational skills, but their capacity to act as agents of social accountability agents remained limited. The reasons for this are the strong cultural and political limitations, as well as a limited timeframe and resource constraints.
- The research has revealed marginal improvements related to the capacities of local administration for social accountability. The weak structural features of civil society in combination with the strong position of government can in some instances lead to the danger of government having control over civil society. The non-confrontational approach can further contribute to the persistence of this trend.
- The research findings indicate a weak potential for civic activism among the citizens and communities interviewed. With the exception of cases where citizens engaged in protests related to the endangerment of their basic livelihood, the prevailing state is one of citizen passivity and pessimism. CSOs are reluctant to 'engage in politics' (this is a manifestation of political pragmatism in an oppressive political environment). As a consequence, their stronger impact on civic activism is lacking. However, research revealed that in cases where people's livelihoods are seriously endangered, such as in the case of fishery communities and land-grabbing, citizens can organise effective protests that can be considered as an improved capacity for social accountability even if they did not occur as a direct result of the project's (capacity building) activities. This finding can also indicate a pattern of 'accumulation' of capacities (knowledge, awareness, articulation of interests, organisation and coordination, etc.) that can later lead on to stronger action, when other conditions are met.
- Research revealed no evidence that investing in social accountability is contributing to good governance in the areas researched. Social accountability practices have led to some improvements in the performance of local administration and public service. However, these improvements were either of less significance, or limited to the time frame of project activities. In the absence of increased government capacity to respond to the needs of the population, in

some cases (e.g. fishery communities) citizens were taking over the government functions of security and environmental preservation. This self-organisation could contribute to a future capacity for social accountability activities.

- The background assumption about the promotion of social accountability being more feasible at the local level was not fully supported, since local authorities can be - and often are - as distant as higher levels of authorities due to their loyalties to higher government and party ranks. A focus on local governance can be a risk, because it can enable local authorities to control civil society more easily through CBOs and through formalistic social accountability mechanisms. The background assumption on a non-confrontational approach was realistic, taking into account the structural and political limitations. However, there is no evidence that the non-confrontational approach that was applied had induced changes in existing power relations. With the limited achievements for the promotion of social accountability within the project framework, there were no grounds for identifying a clear impact on the advancement of political accountability.

Implications for further research and policy implications

- Any future attempts to promote social accountability and to increase the proactive engagement of citizens should take a more diversified approach to citizens and explore the various potentials and limitations of social groups in relation to their structural positions, interests and capability to engage in various types of actions. This would imply a tailor-made and nuanced approach but also a strengthening of civic dialogue and of citizen activism prior to facilitating their engagement with government.
- The restrictive political environment, with its all-pervasive patronage networks and high level of corruption, should be taken into account as a key variable that limits all efforts invested in citizen activation within local communities. Alternative models should be explored and piloted, such as the dual empowerment of citizens for action at both local and central level; or a more indirect focus on their empowerment through economic participation and human resource development that could strengthen possibilities for social accountability at various levels.
- A more differentiated approach to the short-term, mid-term and long-term objectives and the contribution of concrete actions to these objectives. Sometimes it is clear that an intervention will not bring immediate results, but can contribute to the long-term accumulation of 'civic action assets' that can later bring about the desired changes. However, in the short term these actions can seem ineffective. The time dimension and its dynamics should form a more important part of the ToC and of interventions.

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Introduction

This paper is part of the ‘Theories in Practice’ series that includes a number of articles analysing the implementation of Theories of Change (ToC) in The Asia Foundation’s development interventions. The series is an output of research undertaken within the collaboration between the Justice and Security Research Programme (JRSP) and The Asia Foundation (TAF).

The main focus of this paper is on a ToC for the promotion of social accountability in Cambodia and its application through the Non-State Actor Component (NSAC) of the Demand For Good Governance (DFGG) project which TAF implemented during 2009-2013 with support from the World Bank. The key objectives of this paper are threefold: (i) to review the inherent reasoning, assumptions and logic within the theory of change underlying the social accountability project; (ii) to analyse how the theory of change was applied and how it worked in practice and to identify the achievements and obstacles to its effectiveness; (iii) to contribute to the debate on the role of theory of change in development interventions based on the findings of this research.

Conceptual framework

The attempt to analyse how ToC was defined and applied in the context of social accountability in Cambodia requires some conceptual clarifications. The relevant notions, concepts, or tools can be problematic due to a lack of precision in the way in which these terms are used, both in academic debates and in development initiatives. As Stein and Valters showed in their first paper in the TiP series, ToC can be defined and used in various ways (Stein and Valters, 2012). Therefore, ToC as an elusive concept first needs to be clarified in order to be critically reconsidered in its specific form within the DFGG/NSAC project. The second elusive concept is social accountability. As a relatively new concept it is often used in various ways at the theoretical and practical levels. In addition, there are many important and relevant notions that are linked to social accountability - such as good governance, democratisation, and civil society - and each of these requires at least a basic definition in the context of our research.

Theory of change, or theory for change?

A detailed review of the various meanings and applications of Theory of Change has already been provided in the first paper in this series (Stein and Valters, 2012). Summing up the diverse meanings, the authors note that ToC is often understood as a ‘way to describe the set of assumptions that explain both the mini-steps that lead to a long term goal and the connections between these activities and the outcomes of an intervention programme’ (Stein and Valters, 2012: 3).

If we accept this definition of ToC, it poses the question: what makes it different to a simple strategic framework in which objectives, activities, outputs and results are related in a systematic and logical way? Why is this tool called a ‘theory’?

One answer is that, unlike a strategic framework, ToCs rely on more fundamental assumptions about development, about the nature of a problem, and about the determinants and conditions for change. Some authors suggest that ToC originates from an increased desire on the part of organisations to be able to plan, describe, explore, monitor and evaluate change but *in a way that reflects a complex and systemic understanding of development* (Cathy, 2011, cited from Stein and Valters, 2012: 3). Assumptions are often referred to as the necessary conditions for change, or the underlying conditions or resources that need to exist for planned change to occur (Ellis et al, 2011, cited from Stein and Valters, 2012: 10). Therefore, the theory of change can be expressed in a strategic framework manner, but it is more ‘theoretical’, meaning that it is relying (implicitly or explicitly) on certain assumptions about the problem (the subject of an intervention), its interaction with other problems, determinants of its change and its possible effects.

On the other hand, ToC differs from scientific theories, because its focus and scope are usually restricted by the immediate (intervention) goals. General assumptions about how certain problems were caused and what were the deterministic patterns that shaped them and inter-related them to other problems, may remain very implicit within the ToC, since the aim is to provide more concrete assumptions directed by the project objectives. These assumptions are more focused on how it will be possible to induce change, in accordance with some pre-defined goals, in the particular context. It is true that ToC assumptions are backed by more general assumptions and more implicit theories of change and development, but they are also restricted by particular frameworks and resources (human, financial, time, etc.). Therefore, they could be understood more as theories *for* change than theories *of* change.

Social accountability

Social accountability (SA) represents a specific form of more general accountability. As Bovens noted, in the contemporary political and scholarly discourse ‘accountability’ often serves as a conceptual umbrella that covers various distinct concepts, such as transparency, equity, democracy, efficiency, responsiveness, responsibility and integrity. In some contexts (particularly American), accountability is often used interchangeably with ‘good governance’. Bovens describes accountability as ‘the obligation to explain and justify conduct’ and defines it as ‘a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgment, and the actor may face consequences’ (Bovens, 2007: 450). The actor can be either an individual or an organisation, institution or agency; the accountability forum can be a specific person or agency, the relationships can have the principal-agent relation or some other form, while obligations can be both formal or informal (Bovens, 2007: 451).

Social accountability represents one form of accountability, in addition to political, professional, corporate, or administrative accountability. However, there are different definitions of social accountability which we cannot systematically and exhaustively review here. In some of the influential approaches, social accountability is understood as a mechanism whereby citizens, citizens’ associations, movements and media hold political authorities accountable through various actions that include budget

monitoring, performance monitoring, naming and blaming etc. Social accountability employs both institutional and non-institutional tools (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006).¹ In this definition, however, social accountability is restricted to the monitoring of government actions. In other interpretations, some of which are very influential among international development organisations (including the World Bank), social accountability includes almost all the activities of citizens *vis-à-vis* the state, such as monitoring, participation in decision making and participation in design and delivery of policies and services (Malena, Forster and Singh, 2004, Joshi and Houtzager, 2012).

Social accountability should not be confused with political accountability that is manifested through democratic elections whereby citizens hold government officials and politicians accountable. It should also not be confused with a horizontal political accountability manifested through separation of powers and internal governmental system of checks and balances. In contrast to these, social accountability relies on civil society, including media institutions, to put pressure on politicians and public officials (Malena, Reiner and Singh, 2004; Kimcheoun, 2007). In O'Donnell's opinion, vertical or electoral accountability must by definition exist in a democracy, while the degree and effectiveness of societal and horizontal accountability, by contrast, varies across cases and time. By analysing these variations, we can assess the quality of democracy.²

Research objectives and methodology

The main subject of our research was the application of a TAF Theory of Change related to the promotion of social accountability in Cambodia. The ToC was at the core of the DFGG/NSAC project implemented by TAF during 2009-2013 with the support of the World Bank and in coordination with the Ministry of Interior of the Royal Government of the Kingdom of Cambodia (RGoC).

The intention embodied in NSAC was to build capacity in CSOs in Cambodia to enable them to engage more effectively in governance reforms and to develop innovative social accountability approaches. Two categories of grants, Partnership and Thematic Grants, were provided to encourage demand-based approaches that would promote innovative partnerships, learning, and capacity development. These grants were expected to emphasise the principles of 'constructive engagement' between the state and the CSOs, including good communication practices, mutual respect, and responsibility. It was expected that government confidence in these activities would increase and as a consequence, similar partnerships would be replicated in other agencies and support for independent CSO activities would become more likely (Society for Participatory Research in Asia and SILAKA Organization, 2013).

¹ The examples of institutionally channelled actions are activation of legal actions, claims before oversight agencies, while social mobilisations and media exposés are examples of non-institutional ones.

² The lack of a vigorous and self-assertive society, for instance, or the incapacity or unwillingness of certain state institutions to exercise their prescribed authority over other state institutions (especially elected officials) is a telltale sign of low-quality democracy (O'Donnell, 2004: 37).

The project consisted of five sets of issues, in accordance with the priorities set by the sub-national democratic development framework in Cambodia: 1) effective delivery of public services, 2) effective delivery of public registration documents, 3) community access to natural resources management and livelihood, 4) conflict and dispute resolution, and 5) civic engagement and democratisation. There were two rounds of grants within the project framework. During the first round seventeen CSOs were provided with thematic grants and in the second round ten CSOs received grants. In addition, three CSOs in each round were provided with partnership grants with the objective of enhancing the efficiency of one of the partner state institutions.

Due to limited time and resources for researching the ToC in practice we focused on two sub-components:

1. Effective delivery of public services in education
2. Community access to natural resources important for fishery groups

Although all topics were highly relevant for the promotion of social accountability in Cambodia, the two we selected were of particular interest. Education was chosen because of the fact that the development of human resources is one of the key preconditions for development. A heavy historical burden has left huge gaps in the educational capacities of the population but also in the educational system itself.³ The low quality of education services and the spread of informal practices of bribery at the micro community level are among crucial obstacles to the advancement of human resources in the new generation (Hughes, 2003; Springer, 2010). Therefore, if the phenomenon of social accountability were to occur in Cambodia, it could be assumed that social accountability could be found within the education sector.

The issue of fishery management and access to natural resources represents an even more challenging and contested area. The management of natural resources is strongly embedded in the specific neo-patrimonial structure of Cambodian society. As a consequence of limited access to, or even exclusion from, natural resources management, fishing communities face serious obstacles to their economic and social reproduction and their livelihoods are often endangered.

Fishery management differs from the provision of education services in several important ways: (1) Providing access to education carries far less concentration of potential rent seeking (or monetary reward to selected individuals) than does fishery management, which is more diffused, (2) providing fishery management services is not as clearly defined as a distinct set of services that citizens expect the state to provide; whereas education is something that citizens are more likely to expect the state to be accountable for, (3) unlike education, where the trade-off between addressing shortfalls in accountability are more long-term in nature, fishing communities depend on managing fish stocks for their daily livelihood. Therefore, the topic of fishery management was expected to yield a contested area for social accountability, where the state would be challenged to respond to the high citizen demand for fishery management and to different rent-seeking opportunities.

The research framework was developed around three basic questions:

³ During the Khmer Rouge regime, out of 20,000 teachers only 7,000 survived (Tully, 2006: 201).

- What is the content of the social accountability ToC and what are the core and background assumptions?
- How was this particular ToC defined and why were some assumptions chosen and not others?
- How useful was the ToC as a tool to plan the development intervention in the form of fostering social accountability in a politically restrictive environment?

The research was conducted mostly in the form of case studies using multiple data sources (triangulation), such as project documentation and interviews with representatives of various stakeholders including TAF personnel engaged in project management and implementation, representatives of local authorities, representatives of local service providers, NGOs, CBOs and citizens. The fieldwork was conducted during January-April 2014.

Structure of the paper

The paper is divided into four major parts. In the first part, the context of socio-economic development and political and structural changes in Cambodia are described, with a focus on the specific conditions relevant to social accountability. We pay particular attention to the processes of democratisation, decentralisation, administrative and public policy reforms, and the features and role of civil society. In the second part, the ToC is deconstructed with the aim of identifying the key explicit and implicit assumptions that lay behind the TAF intervention within the DFGG/NSAC project. In the third part, the research findings from two selected project components are presented – education and the management of natural resources. In the final part conclusions are drawn and some reflections on the effectiveness of the particular ToC are presented.

The Cambodian Context for Social Accountability

The introduction of social accountability practices in Cambodia takes place in a social and political environment burdened by the legacy of the Khmer Rouge's devastation of society. The Pol Pot regime wanted to reconstruct society according to a blueprint of agrarian socialism. The urban population was expelled to rural areas and even the rural population was relocated. Private property and money were abolished and the family structure was undermined in favour of collectives. It is estimated that in a few short years of Khmer Rouge rule, the Cambodian population was reduced by around 1.7 million people through political and ethnic cleansing, or through devastating living conditions marked by malnutrition, hunger, work overload and poor health care. Overall, this led to the complete collapse of the state, economy and civil society.

Since 1980, Cambodian society has undergone a complex transformation that includes processes of democratisation, the development of a market economy and the pacification of society. The process has been influenced by a dense community of international donors and development agencies. Nevertheless, various attempts to

analyse and evaluate the process of transformation have drawn the conclusion that achievements are, so far, of very limited success (Hughes, 2003).

With an average annual economic growth of approximately 8 percent over the last 10 years, Cambodia was among the fastest growing economies in post-conflict societies. This growth is largely fuelled by urban-based garment production, tourism and some services, while the rural economy is still strongly reliant on the low-productivity primary sector, with agriculture narrowly focused on paddy production. However, the effects of high growth have been reduced due to the high levels of inequality. According to the Human Development Report, the HDI value of Cambodia (0.543) in 2012 was below the average value of East Asia and Pacific countries (0.683) and HDI countries in general (0.640).⁴

The rural-urban divide is profound in Cambodia. Predominantly low productivity work on smallholdings leads to high levels of poverty - of the one-third of the population living below the poverty line, 90 percent are in rural areas, especially the inhabitants of mountainous/plateau regions, the rural plains and the Tonlé Sap area. One fifth of the population remains food-poor, unable to meet basic daily nutritional needs. Malaria, dengue fever, diarrhoea and water-borne diseases are rampant, and each year 30,000 children die from largely preventable causes.⁵

The application of the TAF ToC related to the promotion of social accountability will be analysed against this context. In order to explore the structural, systemic and cultural determinants that can create the environment for social accountability we will review the most relevant features of Cambodian society.

Public administration and neo-patrimonialism

The history of Cambodia is predominantly the history of an authoritarian distribution of power (whether in the hands of domestic or colonial rulers), the underdevelopment of state institutions captured by elites, and a social structure imbued with patron-client relations from the top to the bottom of the political and social hierarchy.⁶ Economic and political elites are closely networked⁷ and patron-client relations are embedded in the political and social structures. When such networks merge with the bureaucratic state structure, a form of neo-patrimonialism emerges (Weber, 1978) that strongly

⁴ When adjusted for inequalities, the IHDI value drops 26 percent further below the average for region. This drop represents the loss in potential human development due to the inequality in life expectancy, income and education (UNDP, 2013b).

⁵ Furthermore, access to potable water is well under 40 percent in rural areas, and less than ten percent for the poorest half of the rural population. Maternal mortality rates in rural areas remain very high (well over 450 per 100,000 live births) (UNDP, 2013b). Cambodia has made considerable progress in literacy and education: Over the six-year period 1998-2004, adult literacy rose from 67.3 percent to 73.6 percent (males from 79.5 to 84.7 percent, females from 57 to 64.7 percent) (UNDP, 2007).

⁶ Patron-client relations, as defined by James Scott, represent 'a special case of dyadic ties involving a largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socio-economic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection and/or benefits to the person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal service to the patron' (Scott, 1972: 8).

⁷ Some research indicates that the entire Cambodian economy is under the control of a small number of families with ties to the ruling party, the Cambodian People's Party (Peou, 2005: 151).

limits all attempts to build modern public administrative and governance structures. In contemporary Cambodia, the patron-client networks are strongly entrenched in the state structures (i.e. among state officials and civil servants) and they enable the extraction of resources for the benefit of the patron and his/her clients (Hughes, 2003; Peou, 2005; Un, 2006).⁸ Whether they are based on business links, family or party affiliation, patron-client relationships often become more powerful than the formal structures. They are also strongly embedded in the CPP structure which deeply overlaps with the state structures.⁹

This neo-patrimonialism is of key importance for social accountability, since it relies on a specific concept of accountability. Namely, in such a context, accountability is usually understood either as a one-to-one relation or a systemic, structural network of relations, in which individuals in the lower ranks of the hierarchy are accountable to individuals in the higher ranks, or in which accountability is owed to particular groups engaged in the exchange, such as kinship groups, friendship groups, or political groups with which the actor is connected (Kimchoeun, 2007). This is significantly different from the Western-oriented, democratic concept of accountability in which actors in power should be accountable to society, understood in its general form.

Corruption has been one of the major concerns in Cambodian society.¹⁰ Numerous reports and research findings indicate the widespread practice of bribery that exists at almost all levels, from the local commune level to the high levels of national politics. In September 2004, the Prime Minister declared a 'war on corruption', but his Government refused to sign the UN Anti-Corruption Convention. By 2006, Cambodia had failed to adopt any robust anti-corruption legislation (Peou, 2005), and despite an international outcry and domestic protest against corruption, no high-ranking government official has ever been punished for corruption, and so the practice continues to flourish (Un, 2006: 229).

Patrimonial political arrangements have an overwhelmingly negative impact on state functions, for example its effectiveness in designing and implementing public policies, sustaining fiscal stability and collecting regular public revenues. Such arrangements lead to political and economic inequalities and result in what is often

⁸ Patronage networks even managed to influence the distribution of aid to the rural population in the 1990's. As Vijghen reports, the aid was often distributed according to lines of clientelism and favour (Vijghen, 1996).

⁹ As reported by the analysts, patron-client networks within the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) were built in the 1980s and consolidated in the early 1990 (Un, 2006). During the last 25 years, the CPP managed to keep a grip on power and remain the uncontested supreme political force in the country. This is mostly due to the fact that the CPP was very successful in securing a presence across the whole country, especially in rural areas, through a network of local party committees. Millions of people were drawn to join the party and a network of local leaders and offices was established. Caroline Hughes reports that during the 1990s there was a comprehensive effort by the CPP to affiliate all successes of the state, such as infrastructure works, with the ruling party and with Prime Minister Hun Sen. For example, the CPP logo with Hun Sen's monogram would appear on all public buildings, roads etc. rebuilt by senior party members, thus ensuring that ordinary people had a clear association between the party and the delivery of collective goods to villages and communes (Hughes, 2003). Surprisingly enough, the practice of buying votes is not the exclusive characteristic of the ruling party. Apparently, the SRP was also involved in delivering gifts to its constituencies (Poeu, 2005: 111).

¹⁰ Some estimates say that due to corruption Cambodia loses between USD 300 million and USD 500 million per year in revenue (CHCR, 2012: 18).

described as ‘crony capitalism’ with ‘predatory elites’ seizing resources and leading to ‘state capture’ or ‘political capitalism’ (Kimchoeun, 2007; Ganev, 2009; Un, 2005).

Decentralisation and the official approach to social accountability

Decentralisation is often seen as a process of extending democratisation by ‘bringing government closer to the people’ and creating stronger accountability between state and citizens (Manor, 1999). The process of decentralisation was initiated in Cambodia in 2002 with the first elections for commune councils,¹¹ the key units of self-government that serve as the elected representatives of the community but also as agents of national-level authorities. The commune councils are responsible for planning local development, for dispute resolution (covering various issues such as domestic violence, boundary disputes etc) but they are also gradually taking an active part in natural resource management (Plummer and Tritt, eds. 2011). Although members of the commune council are elected by the people, they feel responsible and accountable to the higher tiers of government - the district level. The administrative power at the district level overlaps with the political power of the ruling party since the district governor is usually the head of the CPP to whom the council members from CPP are also responsible. This further blurs the lines of accountability (Kim, 2012: 140).

There are additionally two important links in the local governance structure in rural areas: one aimed at bringing commune councils closer to citizens (the village chief¹²) and the other aimed at connecting them more closely to central government (a clerk appointed by the Ministry of the Interior).¹³

Village residents have certain means of participation in local decision-making, such as regular village meetings. However, these tend to gather only a small percentage of villagers, with an over-representation of poor households with less influence. The meetings do not influence the policymaking process and are generally seen as a formality to be fulfilled (Plummer and Tritt, eds. 2011; Kim, 2012). The same conclusion is valid for other bodies in which participatory decision making is supposed to take place, such as the Planning and Budgeting Committee.

The Commune Councils face a number of difficulties in performing their role in governing local communities. Part of the problem stems from financial constraints,¹⁴

¹¹ These units of local government are elected directly, while district and provincial authorities are elected indirectly by the members of the commune councils.

¹² Appointed by the community council, they are often representatives of political parties and their role is to disseminate information, conduct political campaigns and participate in numerous administrative and economic procedures when villagers need their approval prior to the approval of council (e.g. selling of property, issuing administrative documents and the like).

¹³ Formally, the clerk’s roles include basic administration, financial management, procurement, and civil registration. Because the clerks are essential to all aspects of the planning and implementation processes (and they are likely to be the most educated people in the commune), these low paid administrators (with an average monthly salary of USD 20 in 2011) play an important role within the local government system (Plummer and Tritt, eds. 2011:20). As one of the interviewees in our research states ‘The Chief of the Council has the power but the clerk has the stamp’ (Interview, February 2014).

¹⁴ Although they are entitled to charge for various civil registration services and to collect taxes from local business, they often are bypassed by provincial/district authorities and technical line departments,

while part comes from the low levels of human capital since the majority of commune council members have a limited education and experience in managing public tasks (Kim, 2012: 83). It is not surprising therefore, that over 70 percent of voters think that the commune councils' decisions did not affect their daily lives (Kim, 2012: 94).

Assessments of the achievements of decentralisation processes in Cambodia are ambiguous. On one hand there is a widespread belief that democratic consolidation can be fostered from the lower levels of government (bottom-up approach). Decentralisation is sometimes even considered as the most viable option for establishing democratic institutions in Cambodia through 'soft local politics' where democratic values can be spread and the legitimacy of the political regime can be harnessed (Kim, 2012; Öjendal and Kim, 2011). According to these opinions, the particular version of decentralisation that has taken place in Cambodia has so far achieved two things. Firstly, it has opened up a political space in a benevolent (i.e. democratic) way and enabled the growth of a positive relation between civil society and the local state, thereby reducing the 'governance gap' and enhancing the legitimacy of the state at the local level. The new political space may mean that citizens start to cultivate loyalty to the state and this would create much needed regime legitimacy. Secondly, it has reconnected local government with the central state since local government has been awarded a central role in the initiation of a bold public sector reform. This can reduce the possibility of warlordism or anarchy giving rise to civil strife or instability and it can lessen the risk of state failure (Öjendal & Kim, 2011: 20).

On the other hand, decentralisation processes are coming under under fierce criticism. According to this argument, because decentralisation was not followed with the devolution of power and authority, it became a method to consolidate the political control of the ruling Cambodian People's Party from the top to the bottom, without the political elite intending to give up overall political and economic power (Blunt and Turner, 2005).

Within the official reforms aiming at democratisation and public administration reform, decentralisation is seen as an important process, closely interlinked with social accountability. This assumption is manifested in the Strategic Plan on Social Accountability for Sub-National Democratic Development which was adopted by the Royal Government of Cambodia in 2013. This document represents an attempt by the government to transform the understanding of social accountability in accordance with the Western-oriented concept and to apply it through widespread and intensive efforts from the large international donor community in Phnom Penh. Social accountability is seen as a process that aims at empowering citizens and local communities, particularly women, youth and disadvantaged groups, to strengthen the allocation and use of budgets and the delivery of local public services through improved access and use of information and citizen-led monitoring of budgets and the performance of Sub-National Administrations (RGoC, 2013: 1). Social accountability

which is not in accordance with the decentralisation law. The central government and provincial technical agencies do not share the non-tax and tax revenues with the communes (Kim, 2012: 73), though the mechanism for financial support of the development initiatives of local authorities is established in the form of the central Commune Sangkat Fund. A national survey among Cambodian citizens and members of the commune councils reveals that they all believe that communes lack sufficient funding to be responsive (Ninh and Henke, 2005).

is understood as a process that is facilitated by the state and civic organisations. It should lead to empowered citizens, more responsive government at the local level, better service delivery and an increase in social capital (RGoC, 2013: 1-2).¹⁵ In order to increase the accountability of various levels of government, the RGoC has introduced numerous accountability mechanisms, for example accountability working groups that resolve citizens' complaints, and accountability boxes where citizens can put their complaints and concerns in writing. These practices are analysed in details in section 4 of this paper. However, available research indicates that these have not proven to be fruitful in fostering accountability (Vuthy and Craig, 2008).

In general, both documents and practice reveal the government's intention to pursue a social accountability agenda, through an understanding of social accountability as being a partnership and using a non-conflict approach with a focus on knowledge, capacity building and facilitation on behalf of state institutions. This approach is a technocratic one, as opposed to more critical approaches that emphasise public space, social class alliances and similar (Springer, 2010). The document lacks an understanding of politics as a sphere for negotiating social interests, engaging with social movements, and building democracy through political and social – not just technical - actions.

Civil society

Efforts to create responsive and sustainable lower tiers of government have been closely connected with the issue of fostering the development of local civil society. Decentralisation and civil society can be mutually supportive, or even mutually dependent. It is argued that the development of civil society at the commune level improves the 'demand' as well as the 'supply' side of services, increases the ability of the local community to resolve urgent policy issues, and increases human capital (Öjendal and Kim, 2012).

Civil society organisations appear in various forms:

- Traditional associations (associations or self-help groups), frequently linked to pagodas;
- 'Modern', community-based organisations (CBOs), whose main purpose is to engage citizens directly in local development and bottom-up planning;
- Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that are focused either on delivery of support services to various groups of citizens, or on mostly urban-based human rights activism;
- Think-tank organisations that have emerged recently and are focused on research and policy analysis;

¹⁵ The social accountability framework states the following strategies: (1) improvement of transparency and use of information on standards, budgets and performance, which are crucial for the promotion of genuine civic engagement; (2) development of tools and techniques for citizens' monitoring of government activities; (3) improvement of budget literacy; (4) building skills to facilitate citizens' engagement and (5) knowledge management, meaning that knowledge derived from social accountability practices will be used to inform local and national authorities.

- Trade unions that are organised around the interests of workers employed in the growing industries and others.

Despite the presence of various types of civil society organisations, civil society suffers from many weaknesses. Overall civic participation in Cambodia is low. The World Bank study found that only 23 percent of respondents belonged to some kind of organisation, but the majority of them actually belonged to traditional associations, created around pagodas, that are non-political in nature. Other types of CBOs (such as women's, farmers' or fishermen's associations) are, for the most part, a more recent phenomenon, usually created as a result of external NGO support, and very often reliant on ongoing external inputs or incentives to function. Their scope and impact is quite limited. Professional NGOs (which constitute the majority of registered CSOs in Cambodia) are rarely membership organisations and, for the most part, lack grassroots constituencies. They typically consist of small numbers of paid staff, defending a certain cause or advocating on behalf of a certain target populations (such as women, children, or poor people) but lacking meaningful and sustained linkages with such groups (World Bank, 2009: 44).

World Bank research also revealed a lack of consensus regarding what constitutes legitimate and 'appropriate' roles for civil society. While state actors seem to acknowledge and appreciate the important social role of 'service delivery' and welfare-oriented CSOs, they are less willing to accept the legitimacy of more rights-based, advocacy-oriented CSO activities. Advocacy efforts (often seeking to address perceived shortcomings or illegitimate actions on the part of the government) are frequently interpreted by the government as a direct attack on their authority and labeled as illegitimate 'opposition' to the government. Conflicting perceptions about the role of civil society are present even among CSO practitioners, with some individuals/groups feeling compelled to distance themselves from 'trouble-making' organisations and some 'advocacy' NGOs being criticised or ostracised by their peers if they are perceived as being overly conciliatory or collaborative (The World Bank, 2009: 52).

The perception of the importance of information is rather low, as suggested by a World Bank survey. Findings from this survey indicate that citizen demand for public information remains latent largely due to a lack of awareness of information rights, a reluctance to request 'sensitive' information, and little sense of how to find information or how to use it to effect change (World Bank, 2009:19). Research found a strong feeling, especially at the grassroots level, that governance issues are not a matter of concern for the ordinary citizens and the problems of governance and poor public service delivery can only be resolved from the top down. Due to traditional norms of deference to authority, citizens typically do not dare to ask for information from authorities, especially information related to public budgets/expenditures that is perceived as being 'sensitive' and where to seek such information may be seen as interfering in the authorities' affairs. Nor do citizens see it as their role, or right, to call authorities to account. On the other hand, 'government officials are not accustomed to share information' (World Bank, 2009:20).

At the local level, CBOs face various obstacles. When they are pursuing politically sensitive issues or are not following a non-conflicting approach, they are usually faced with the resistance of local government. Moreover, local authorities have a

much stronger feeling of loyalty to the higher tiers of power, and therefore they are often reluctant to cooperate with CBOs, being afraid of repercussions.¹⁶ There has also been a move towards CBOs being co-opted by the state through a strict policy of issuing licences for work and activities, monitoring CSO activities and cooptation of state officials into CBO leadership or membership (Ou, 2013). This further contributes to the widely shared practice of non-confrontation with the state.¹⁷ Two typical situations where CBOs enter into conflict with commune councils were identified: when they engage in political mobilisation or awareness raising, and when they enter into conflict with external powerful players and seek to involve the council in the conflict, for example over natural resources (Öjendal and Kim, 2012; Ninh and Henke, 2005; Plummer and Tritt, eds. 2011). In sum, open rebellion in the local community is rare, and consequently there is little sense in the village of a civil space in which the operations of power can be openly critiqued. Rather, resistance within the local community remains covert (Hughes, 2007: 171).

The study of NGOs and their capacities reveals that they are centralised and hierarchical, with a heavy emphasis on the didactic transmission of foreign knowledge and a cautious and professional approach to mediating between ‘grassroots’ initiatives and government. This feature is often attributed to the Khmer cultural predisposition, but also to the political economy of international support which exacerbated these predispositions rather than ameliorating them (Hughes, 2007: 171). Their dependence on international organisations is understood partly as a consequence of the developing nature of the Cambodian state that has resisted the emergence of a stable and unthreatening political space for civil contention with state actors. It is considered that the emergence of such space, and the admission of a principle of transparency and accountability, would conflict with state strategies of transformed patronage (Hughes, 2007: 171).

Theory of Change for the Promotion of Social Accountability: an analytical framework

In order to analyse how the TAF Theory of Change supported the promotion of social accountability in Cambodia within the DFGG/NSAC project, it was important to deconstruct the ToC, to identify explicit and implicit assumptions, and to define an analytical tool for examining the relation between the ToC and the intervention in practice.

¹⁶ Commune officials are still subject to the dictates of the political party to which they belong, which means that their loyalties are divided between party bosses, constituents and district government officials. There is still a potential for conflicting interests between these groups, which puts great pressure on commune chiefs and councillors (Kim, 2012: 72).

¹⁷ Ou further implies this might mean that the liberal concept of civil society as an autonomous field might not be applicable to the Cambodian context, but a more Gramscian approach (Ou, 2013).

Theory of change deconstructed

The TAF ToC was explored using multiple sources: the explicit formulations and diagram from project documents and evaluation reports,¹⁸ background materials, including the Project to Enhance Capacity in Social Accountability (PECSA) conducted by the World Bank (a predecessor of the TAF project), and in-depth interviews with TAF staff in Phnom Penh. The use of multiple sources was important to reconstruct not only the explicit ToC but also the context in which it was formulated, as well as the implicit, background, and latent assumptions that strongly influenced the ToC and the project design.

The DSGG/NSAC project evolved from the previous PECSA project designed and implemented by the World Bank. Therefore, it reflects the knowledge and understanding of the social accountability concept and approach of the World Bank. Furthermore, it was implemented in partnership with the RGoC and was aligned therefore with the official government understanding of social accountability.

As emphasised in the introductory chapter, The World Bank understands social accountability as ‘the broad range of actions and mechanisms (beyond voting) that citizens can use to help the government be more effective and accountable, as well as actions on the part of government, civil society, media and other societal actors that promote or facilitate these efforts’ (The World Bank, 2009). Social accountability is demand-driven and operates from the bottom-up. Social accountability from this perspective includes participatory public policy-making, participatory budgeting, public expenditure tracking, citizens monitoring and citizen evaluation of public service delivery. It also includes building the capacities and knowledge of citizens in order to improve their understanding of public policies and develop a more effective utilisation of social accountability mechanisms, as well as citizen involvement in internal accountability mechanisms (e.g. membership of public commission and hearings, citizens’ advisory committees etc.) (Malena, Forster and Singh, 2004:3).

The rationale for social accountability lies in understanding that it (1) improves governance; (2) increases development effectiveness through improved public service delivery and more informed policy design and (3) empowers citizens (Malena, Forster and Singh, 2004:4). Good governance can be achieved because ‘social accountability practices enhance the ability of citizens to move beyond mere protest toward engaging with bureaucrats and politicians in a more informed, organized, constructive and systematic manner, thus increasing the chances of effecting positive change’ (Malena, Forster and Singh, 2004:5). This technocratic and managerial approach to social accountability has often been illustrated with the catchword ‘counting, not shouting’ (World Bank, 2004)¹⁹ and this is exactly the approach that was built into the logic of the DFGG/NSAC project.

The overall objective of the DFGG/NSAC was to strengthen citizens’ capacity to demand good governance by funding non-state institutions and coalitions for social

¹⁸ Society for Participatory Research in Asia and Silaka Organization, *Independent Mid-Line Evaluation of the Non-State Actor Component (NSAC) of the Demand for Good Governance (DFGG)*, Phnom Penh, November 2012, p.59

¹⁹ However, the civil society - social accountability - good governance nexus is problematic. It depends on numerous presumptions about power structures, the quality of the state and the civil society itself (e.g. Roy, 2008).

accountability and constructive engagement initiatives in five priority areas (natural resources, private sector, public finances, local public services and media).

The project was designed around a relatively narrow definition of social accountability as ‘new mechanisms for direct and regular *dialogue and negotiation* between citizens and the state at all levels of government. These may include regular *facilitated exchanges* between non-state and state actors through public forums that involve practitioners, sector specialists and public service providers, *informal networking* opportunities promoting access to information, or activities that monitor the activities of the state.’ In the project document it is also stated that ‘*social accountability can occur where civil society works collaboratively with the government to develop direct accountability relationships between citizens and the state*’ (emphasis added by authors). This understanding of social accountability was in line with the concept adopted by the World Bank which was the project donor.

This understanding of social accountability was further operationalised (within the project framework) in the four clusters of activities through which CSOs can perform social accountability practices, each containing specific tools (TAF, 2008):

- 1) Promotion of public demand for governance through activities that provide access to information on government processes, laws and programs, and budgets, that can use such tools as information campaigns, public workshops, information boards, radio programs, leaflets, posters, etc.
- 2) Mediation practices that encourage policy consultations with the public, address grievances, and support dispute resolution, and which can be conducted with tools such as accountability boxes, public forums, interface meetings, commune council meetings, and similar.
- 3) Response mechanisms that encourage competitive processes to improve the efficiency of government programs, which could include performance awards, participatory planning, complaint mechanisms.
- 4) Monitoring activities provide independent, third-party assessment of government programs and innovations and include tools such as community scorecards, surveys, informal monitoring networks.

In the project document, capacity was not defined explicitly. However, implicitly we can recognise the presence of mainstream thinking among development agencies, according to which capacity is understood as ‘the ability of people, organizations and society as a whole to manage their affairs successfully’ (OECD, 2006).²⁰ The project document envisages various capacity building strategies, including capacity building efforts aimed at raising the management skills of local CSOs in the fields of strategic planning, monitoring, evaluation, and learning and knowledge-sharing activities in regard to the social accountability process (TAF, 2008: 27).

The ToC was guided by four objectives to be achieved/contributed by the project:

²⁰ Capacity development can be defined as a process or approach which encompasses strategies, methodologies, activities and tools which aim at improving/increasing capacities of individuals, organisations, institutions (and even states or societies as whole) to set and achieve their own social, economic, political or other goals.

1. Positive changes in policies, practices and performances of governance institutions
2. Improved partnership between local governments, civil society organizations and citizens
3. Enhanced capacities of CSOs
4. Enhanced participation of Citizens

To achieve these objectives, the ToC was designed around four basic assumptions:

ToC Assumption 1: Providing capacity building and financial support to civil society organizations (CSOs) will enhance their capacities to engage in social accountability practices. Through capacity building support, the opportunity to practice a social accountability approach, as well as through effective reflection, documentation, analysis and knowledge and information sharing, the capacities of CSO for social accountability will be enhanced. Furthermore, financing CSO projects that will provide them with opportunity to practice social accountability activities will enhance their overall capacities for social accountability.

ToC Assumption 2: Providing capacity building and financial support to CSOs to practice SA in partnership with local authorities will enhance capacities of local administration for social accountability. Developing capacities of CSOs for social accountability and supporting their projects which are focused on starting or improving social accountability practices in partnership with local authorities will not only contribute to their overall capacities for social accountability but also to the capacities of local self-governments. Through these joint (partnership) efforts, the local authorities will come to more understanding and appreciation for the social accountability.

ToC Assumption 3: Supporting CSOs to build capacities of citizens for social accountability and to engage them more in various social accountability practices will generally and permanently enhance civic participation of citizens. By supporting CSOs to introduce, conduct and coordinate various social accountability practices that expand the citizens' knowledge on civil rights, government accountability, etc., will lead to a strengthened demand for the accountability among citizens and community based organizations. The project was focused on NGOs as proxies of CSOs.

ToC Assumption 4: Supporting CSOs to perform social accountability practices in partnership with state institutions and with the engagement of citizens will eventually contribute to the better governance (meaning better policies, practices and performance of local institutions). Supporting a partnership approach through non-confrontational social accountability practices will improve the partnership between CSOs and citizens on one side, and state institutions on the other. This will enable state actors to understand the citizens' perspective and the need to take it into account (i.e. in order to be re-elected). This will further contribute to building good governance at the local level. Good governance includes more transparent, democratic governance and better services for the citizens, which, *per definitionem* would mean strengthened and deepened democracy.

Besides these core assumptions, three important background assumptions emerged during in-depth interviews and the analysis of project documents. These assumptions

are not transparent, nor explicitly formulated. However, they come from a deeper understanding of the social context and they lead the process of bridging the gap between the initial intentions of the intervention (operationalised through objectives) and the specific reality on the ground. Although they remained implicit, their impact on the overall project design was significant.

ToC Background Assumption 1: Introducing social accountability practices in the restricted political environment is more feasible at the local level, where state institutions and politicians are close to the citizens. The political system in Cambodia is often characterised as a multi-party democracy with strong authoritarian features. This means there is a limited political and media space for opposition ideas. In these circumstances, TAF project staff believed that launching social accountability practices at the local level, where state officials and institutions are closer to the citizens (i.e. live with them, share their concerns and problems), would yield better results. Some local TAF staff indicated that the general trend among donors has shifted towards local communities. Years of focus on central government proved to be insufficiently effective as they faced significant resistance from central power structures and a lack of commitment.

The World Bank is a significant donor and followed the same shift in thinking. Therefore, the decision to focus on local communities did not entirely originate from TAF and nor is it unquestioned by the project team. Since the project was designed in such a way as to accommodate a broader project intervention and to encompass the key approach of the World Bank, the focus on social accountability instead of political accountability and the focus on the local, instead of central, level of government were partly pre-defined. Members of the TAF project team supported the reasoning behind the decision to focus the intervention at the local level, because they were aware that at the highest ranks of government, where the centres of power are too strong and are reluctant to change a situation where they control resources without interference, it would be not possible to promote social accountability with any effectiveness.

The second reasoning might be that if there was no citizen-state engagement at the local level (at the level at which citizens address their immediate daily needs and concerns) then it would be more difficult to expect citizen-state engagement at higher levels. However, TAF staff are aware that in the long term it will not be sufficient to remain focused on interventions in local communities, because changes have to occur at different state and social levels, including the very top. They are aware also that it is important to support changes with more diverse means, including some that are not at all easily attainable, such as an increase in incomes and improvements in living standards, education and employment. Only these complex, simultaneous, and mutually supportive changes could eventually lead to a more active and aware civil society, and a significant increase in government accountability, improved policies and public services.

ToC Background Assumption 2: In a restrictive political environment a social accountability approach needs to take a non-confrontational form in order to yield results. A non-confrontational approach to social accountability means soft social accountability initiatives by CSOs and strong cooperation with state institutions in the implementation of social accountability activities. This helps to bring state institutions and officials on board instead of making them hostile to change. It is

assumed that this reduces barriers to the introduction of ideas and practices related to accountability, democracy, responsiveness and civil rights. Furthermore, some respondents from TAF project team spoke of their perception that in reality the only effective way to facilitate the creation of public space in local communities, in which citizens could more openly discuss everyday life or policy issues, is to create a more relaxed relationship between citizens and the representatives of local authorities. In a context that is marked by prominent authoritarian relationships, sturdy patron-client relations embedded in horizontal and vertical power structures put strong pressure on members of local government to act in accordance with norms of loyalties. In these circumstances, local representatives of the state should be relieved of the fear that they could be exposed to sanctions from above. A partnership approach should have the effect of removing that fear, leaving them with the impression that they hold the power to let citizens take more space. According to the experience of TAF personnel, this approach leads to more pro-active and benevolent local government representatives, who are more likely to work for the general good in their community. However, the consequence of such a non-confrontational approach can sometimes be a greater focus on the technical issues of local service delivery and local policies at the expense of a more political approach where more crucial social objectives are negotiated.

ToC Background Assumption 3: The social accountability approach will be used as a means for the gradual introduction of political accountability. Political accountability is hampered by the *political culture* that apparently does not include such notions as civil rights and government responsiveness to citizens, as well as the *political system* that is rather authoritarian. Therefore, supporting social accountability practices is a convenient method for gradually introducing the concept of vertical political accountability (the accountability of government towards its citizens).

Bearing in mind the circumstances just described, we can conclude that the TAF ToC was influenced by several factors:

- The broader project framework and approach of the donor (World Bank)
- A general shift in the focus of donors in Cambodia in the field of SA – from central to local settings
- An awareness within the project team of the restricted political space and previous experiences with top-down approaches
- An awareness that this approach may not lead to optimal effects but is merely better than the other alternatives in the present circumstances

Furthermore, interviews with TAF staff indicated that the project was designed and implemented in an environment marked by the fact that NGOs and government were not engaging with each other and TAF needed to bring about this engagement and build trust. This, according to the interviews, initially meant supporting projects that were loosely defined in terms of their contribution to social accountability.

ToC assessment methodology

The ToC can be assessed from the perspective of the various typologies on theories of change that are used in academic and policy literature. This will enable us better to understand some features of this particular ToC focused on social accountability.

According to the first typology, ToC approaches can be understood across a continuum, from a very technical one, to a very contemplative one. In the narrowest, technical form, ToCs are understood as precise **planning tools**, almost extensions of a logframe in their assumptions component. The second type of understanding is more flexible; ToC is understood as a **way of thinking** about how a project is expected to work. This type is less formal and is often implicit. The third type is a complex and **broad understanding of how change happens**. This type expands the ‘political literacy’ of practitioners and enables them to respond to unpredictable events (Stein and Valters, 2012: 5). Within this continuum, the authors identified four broad categories of ToC according to their purpose: strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation, description, and learning. Bearing in mind the explicit and implicit assumptions incorporated in the TAF ToC for the promotion of social accountability, we can conclude that it is closest to the second type. It is not simply technical, yet it is limited in its reflections on the broader development process and on the role of social accountability within that process. It has certain assumptions on the determinants of development, the role of social accountability in processes of democratisation and decentralisation, and assumptions on the role of various actors and agencies, and the factors enabling or preventing change. This defines it more as a way of thinking than a pure planning tool.

According to another typology, (Shapiro, 2006, cited from Stein and Valters, 2012: 9), ToCs can be focused on **changing individuals** (their attitudes, perceptions, feelings, behaviours, motivation), on **changing relationships** (whether cooperative, in the form of partnerships, alliances, coalitions, or those marked by competition or conflict), or focused on **structural, institutional, systemic** changes (laws, organisational or institutional bodies and mechanisms, social structures, etc.). The TAF ToC has elements of all three forms. It is focused on changing individual attitudes (citizens and NGO activists, local government officials, service providers), and capacities for civic action or better governance, but at the same time it is focused on changing relationships (between NGOs and government, NGOs and citizens, citizens and government). However these changes in individuals and relationships eventually have to become embedded in the local structures and systems of governance and service provision.

In order to examine how the ToC was implemented through the project intervention, a methodology was defined so that each core assumption could be explored through certain indicators. The background assumptions represent broader ideas about how change can occur in a particular context and they are much harder to confront with empirical evidence within the limited research framework. However, our research results provided some basis to reflect on the background assumptions as well, although in a less precise manner.

The main methodological challenge was to define appropriate indicators against which assumption could be tested and for which there was available data. In some

cases, the optimal indicators through which the assumption could be assessed were not applicable due to the lack of baseline data. Where the assumption was related to a particular change, the best way to examine them would have been to compare the situation before and after the intervention, but we could not do this due to the lack of appropriate baseline data for our indicators. Therefore, we decided to address this problem by using some proxy indicators. This usually meant using subjective (perception of the change by key stakeholders) instead of objective (changes in numbers, or features of actors, or processes in independently observable) data. The basic analytical framework is presented in the following table, with the list of indicators assigned to each ToC assumption and the appropriate data sources.

| ToC assumption | Indicators |
|---|---|
| A1: CSOs capacities for social accountability (SA) | Better understanding of the importance and role of SA mechanisms in local communities among CSO leaders and members. |
| | More specific knowledge about various SA mechanisms and practices that can be employed by CSOs. |
| | Improvement of social accountability related skills such as campaigning, advocacy, analyses, etc. |
| | Improved skills to manage various resources (organisational, human, financial, including networking) in order to be employed for social accountability activities. |
| | Number and type of new SA activities undertaken after the project. |
| A2: Local authorities' capacities for SA | Better understanding of the importance and role of SA mechanisms in local communities among LA representatives. |
| | Establishment and sustainability of SA mechanisms for monitoring/influencing local governance and services. |
| A3: Citizens participation | Established and lasting institutions, procedures or practices (that go beyond one-time participation or election voting) for the participation of citizens in monitoring/influencing local governance and services. |
| | Increased number of members of grass-roots CSOs |
| | Increased number of citizens participating in these mechanisms. |
| A4: Good governance | Established institutions, practices or procedures that sustain the quality of the services and governance beyond the scope of the project |

In deciding on the proxy indicators for the capacity development assumption, we started from the understanding that capacity is not a goal in itself. It is always capacity for something: for better lobbying and advocacy, for better land and water management, for designing and implementing policies, for fundraising, for effective coordination etc. Within the framework of the TAF project, capacities in social accountability and civic activism were developed in order to be exercised in the public sphere. Therefore, the effectiveness of capacity development is measured through the effective utilisation of these capacities. However, we were also aware that in some contexts capacities could be increased, but the activities based on these capacities could be restricted due to external reasons such as political oppression or lack of funds. Therefore, it would not be entirely fair to measure an increase in capacities only through the number of (new) actions/practices. Because of that, we also used the measures of subjective perceptions on changes in capacities as a complementary or corrective indicator. Finally it was decided that our main focus would be on **translating capacities into effective social accountability practices and identifying and analysing the obstacles.**

The design of indicators for citizen participation and good governance was reliant on the idea that certain preconditions need to be in place for effective civic participation and good governance. In general, civic participation can rest on (1) institutions (procedures, practices) that sustain participation; (2) widely shared political culture of citizens (regardless of the dilemma if it is a result of certain institutional practices) or when there is a lack of such culture, (3) newly adopted knowledge and values among (groups) of citizens. The same argument is applicable to good governance: it rests on (1) institutional practices, (2) wide and continuous public pressure and/or (3) newly adopted values and knowledge. The **institutional foundations of participation and good governance** are the only field where we could reconstruct baseline data. This means that this was the only field where qualitative techniques could provide us with data on the pre-existing practices and structures for participation and quality control for good governance, rather than just perceptions. **Therefore, the research focused on the institutional foundations that channel public participation and sustain good governance.**

Research Findings

The research was carried out in two sub-components of the DFGG/NSAC project:

1. Effective delivery of public services in education
2. Community access to natural resources important for fishery groups

Data were collected through qualitative methods: in-depth individual interviews, group interviews and focused group discussions with representatives of various stakeholders engaged in the project activities: representatives of TAF project team, representatives of NGOs, CBOs, local governments and local institutions delivering services. The fieldwork was conducted in several provinces: Battambang, Banteay Meanchay, Pursat, Takeo, Kampot and Koh Kong. The research findings are presented along core assumptions, but in the last section some reflections are also

provided on background assumptions, having in mind experiences from the field research.

Social accountability in education

The education system in Cambodia began to develop in the mid-twentieth century under strong European influence. However, the initial steps were annulled during the Khmer Rouge regime. Since the Vietnamese liberation/occupation the education system has been under constant development. Today, the key phases in the education system are: three years of a pre-school programme for children under 6 (not compulsory), primary education (grades 1 to 6), lower (grades 7 to 9), (both compulsory), higher secondary education, and university education (both not compulsory.)

The education system is run by the state, although there are also private institutions, many of them located in Phnom Penh. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MOEYS) is in charge of the overall system, while the governance structures also include provincial and district offices for education. The Provincial/Municipal Offices of Education (POE) are responsible for supporting the Ministry in implementing education policies, preparing and submitting plans for further development of education, providing data and statistics on schools, staff and students, and managing educational staff issues within the province or municipality. The District Offices of Education (DOE), as technical implementing bodies under the direct supervision of the POEs, play the main role in ensuring that educational policy and strategy interventions are implemented. Schools play very important roles, especially in making school development plans and annual plans (UNESCO, 2010).

The Cambodian education system has been struggling with various issues, ranging from a low enrolment rate, high repetition and drop out to low quality of education and teaching staff and pervasive corruption in the overall education system. Literacy rates in Cambodia are low: 77.6% for the population over 15, 70.9% for women and only 66.3% for rural women. Up to half of the population over 25 has no formal education; either no education at all, or incomplete primary education (NIS, 2008). The Cambodian education budget is low and amounts to 2.7% of GDP, compared to the 3.6% of GDP regional average for East Asia, 4.2% of GDP average for developing countries overall, or the 5.3% of GDP in Vietnam in 2008.²¹ The quality of education is hampered by inadequate teaching staff and bad infrastructure (World Bank, 2008). On the positive side, the enrolment rate has been increased almost to 90% (Hirosato and Kitamura, 2010). However, completion rates are alarmingly low. Fewer than 50% of enrolled children complete to Grade six, implying a highly uneducated future labour force unable to compete in the knowledge-based regional and global economies (UNDP, 2007).

Qualitative assessments of the performance and governance process in the education system reveal systemic disincentives that lead to poor quality of education (TAF and WB, 2013). Our research indicates that parents, pupils and local communities face severe obstacles in accessing primary and secondary education. The main problems identified were:

²¹ UNDP data: <https://data.undp.org/dataset/Public-expenditure-on-education-of-GDP-/bkr7-unqh> and UNESCO, 2010.

- Teachers sometimes do not come to work, or are drunk.
- School infrastructure can be of low quality: schools do not have enough classrooms or teaching materials etc.
- Teachers demand bribes in various forms: they do not give full lectures, cover all of the curriculum or give out marks unless informal payments are made.
- Schools demand bribes in various forms e.g. the school has introduced parking fees for bikes and as the school is far away from the village, children cannot walk to school and need to pay the bike parking fee.
- Schools and teachers demand extra payments for handbooks.

Local communities have few opportunities to address corruption or the low quality of teaching and school infrastructure. Community councils have limited budgets and can only partly influence local education policies. Provincial and district departments for education are, on the other hand, in charge of the education system but often are not responsive to the needs and complaints of the parents and communities. In spite of the documented problems with the low quality of education and corruption, inspections are rare, ineffective and underfunded (TAF and WB, 2013). To respond to some of these issues, although within the wider framework of good governance and social accountability, the RGoC has created so-called Provincial Accountability Working Groups. These working bodies were supposed to be in charge of dealing with proposals for improvements and the complaints of citizens and communities. However, as we shall see later in more details, this mechanism has not strongly contributed to the overall effectiveness and quality of the education system.

Capacities of CSOs for Social Accountability

The representatives of CSOs we interviewed strongly link social accountability to issues of good governance.²² Their understanding of social accountability was obviously formed under the influence of World Bank doctrine and the PECSA programme. None of those interviewed saw social accountability as a means for controlling government activities, widening political public space, empowering people to participate in political processes etc. When asked about links between social accountability on one side and democracy and the rule of law on the other, they predominantly talked about good governance, good services, better communication between citizens and the government, responsiveness of the government towards the citizens etc. This is a non-confrontational discourse of social accountability that does not include notions of political activism, demanding justifications, explanations or justice. Therefore, our sample of NGOs demonstrates an understanding of social accountability that is focused on good governance and citizen-government cooperation and only indirectly on links between social accountability on one hand and democracy and the rule of law on the other.

²² The fieldwork was carried out in Pursat, Banteay Meanchay, Battambang and Takeo province. The interviews were held with representatives of four NGOs: PK, Pursat, and Banteay Meanchay Provinces (1 interview), AMARA Battambang Province, (2 interviews), RCEDO Banteay Meanchay Province (1 interview) and PDAO, Takeo province (1 interview). Furthermore, interviews were held with parents and members of local communities in Battambang and Takeo.

In accordance with this understanding, their activities were directed to facilitating dialogue between citizens and government and to organising social accountability events (few of the interviewed NGOs indicated their work with local CBOs). These NGOs did not emerge from the communities with whom they worked and had no grassroots there. Therefore, they are not seen as being rooted in communities but as a “bridge between the government and communities”. This was an oft-repeated phrase. The NGOs identify themselves as agents that “bring together people and the government” so they can “understand each other better” and eventually “work together”. They perceive themselves as being as closely related to the donors and government as to the citizens.²³ Thus, their accountability lines seem to the researchers to be blurred.

All the interviews conducted with representatives of NGOs indicate their strong identification with the NGO sector, development and reform (even consultancy) work. Interviewed representatives of NGOs were apparently of a middle class position, which often indicates a social distance in relation to their beneficiaries, particularly in rural areas.²⁴ Many of them have a strong entrepreneurial approach in managing their CSOs, as demonstrated by their ability to adjust to new streams of donor support and to widen activities. They all reported good cooperation with government structures. Secondary data suggest they all have additional for-profit activities. On the other hand, none of those interviewed reported any sign of entrenchment in the communities and/or among the people they represent. This is also confirmed by interviews with citizens who reported their dependence on NGOs and expressed the hope that “NGOs will not leave us”. No sense of belonging to these organisations was expressed among the citizens themselves.

The work they conducted in local communities was mainly focused on training local activists and citizens in various social accountability tools and mechanisms, facilitating social accountability events and negotiating with the government structures *vis-à-vis* noted problems. They are more focused on management issues, such as building networks with donors and government, strong accounting and reporting skills, and none reported any social or civic activism apart from project work. Many of their projects are consultancy in their nature: for example providing training, facilitating processes. The only indirect elements of social activism are activities of ‘raising awareness’. However, as we shall see, even these were not rooted in the communities themselves and nor were they engaged with social groups that could lead change.

The organisations we interviewed had limited prior experience with social accountability activities. Many of them are covering wide areas such as rural development, agriculture, climate change and human rights. They entered the good governance and social accountability fields mainly under the influence of donors, through the PACT and PECSA programmes of the World Bank. The intensive capacity building in social accountability methods and techniques that they have received clearly increased their experience in this respect. However, bearing in mind

²³ In one of the offices a board in the centre of the training room said: “responsible to the commune and to the donors”.

²⁴ Their middle class position is evident from their professional background (former government employees, foreign graduates etc.) and also visible in the various forms through which they express their status affiliation (e.g. possession of electronic devices, watches, cars, bags etc.)

their low starting point, this was not a surprising achievement. As a result, they demonstrate a highly developed discourse in this field and detailed understanding of the environment and processes.

CSOs involved in social accountability projects understand the limitations of their approach. Among these are the limited time span of a project, which therefore cannot sustain mechanisms, the unresponsiveness and lack of awareness among various level of government, the inadequate governance structures (e.g. a commune has no power over a school and sometimes even the district or province does not), the existence of parallel (informal) networks and power structures, and the low level of empowerment of ordinary citizens. Some of them even indicated, in a very indirect manner, the lack of public space or corruption as problems. However, the remedies they propose are not structural and do not actually address any of the major grievances they raise. For example, they are creating personal and professional relations at the district level as the solution to weak oversight, rather than advocating sustainable, official quality control mechanisms such as inspections; they work more at the district level through informal networks to control the school. This demonstrated that, unlike citizens, representatives of CSOs have a thorough understanding of the process and obstacles they face. They understand the governance structures and possibilities and limitations of each level of government and have ideas about how to further the social accountability agenda to the level of the district and the province. However, this is done more through informal and personal or political networks than through official governance structures.

The interventions of CSOs are not sustainable because they depend on the TAF project to finance their staff and activities. After the end of TAF support, their social accountability activities generally ended. Their interventions were not sustainable in two additional aspects: (1) they were not able to incorporate mechanisms either in the existing structures of the government at the commune level, or in the governance structures of schools and (2) they were not relying on social groups that could act as a force to sustain the changes and new mechanisms. None of the interviewed CSO representatives could name social and political forces that could sustain the changes and mechanisms they have created.

The research in the communities covered by the fieldwork indicates that many structures were envisaged as informal mechanisms. Among them are public forums, thematic meetings and scorecards. As such, they were never formally enacted and equipped with duties and their lifespan was closely tied to the project lifespan. The respondents refer to these mechanisms as if they exist, but this is true more in terms of the skills and knowledge of people who used to be their members than in their actual activities.

The research results point to a mixed conclusion. There has obviously been an improvement among CSOs in their understanding of social accountability practices. They seem to have knowledge of various tools, and have skills in campaigning, advocacy, and analysis. However, they possess rather limited skills in the mobilisation of resources. Whilst they might be enthusiastic about it, the actual practice of mobilisation gives different picture. Finally, we have only occasionally encountered new social accountability activities, and these were mainly under new externally-funded project frameworks. No autonomous social accountability initiative was recorded.

Citizen participation

The focus of our interviews with citizens was the problems in educating their children and social activism related to this issue. Many of the interviewed parents and villagers experienced various problems and difficulties in their everyday lives and in educating their children. Naturally, the personal motivation and enthusiasm of the parents differed and this is an individual factor we will not include in our analysis. We had two structurally different cases of rural middle-class representatives (in War Kor commune) and rural poor (in Prey Pdao). Parents from the first group were participating in social accountability activities and put less emphasis on the importance of education than the other group. Parents from the second group had not participated in social accountability activities, but strongly emphasised the importance of education, hoping that their children would achieve a higher education and accordingly increase their social status.

During field research a deep gap between citizens and school and government structures was revealed. However, there were differences between the two groups in the perception of citizens on the one hand and school and commune councils on the other. The middle-class mothers took part in social accountability activities and seemed to have a certain level of freedom in approaching authorities such as the school director. However, they clearly claimed that they would never approach the teacher, since they have a lower education level, or sometimes the teacher was from the town, etc. In Prey Pdao commune the mothers unanimously stated that they never approached the director or the teacher if they experienced problems. It seems that a reluctance to approach the teacher comes from the social distance between him/her and the parents. Parents often have a lower education level, whilst the teacher has a higher social status and is of urban origin. None of the citizens interviewed referred to the school's committees and associations as governance structures in which they participated.

The main problem people face in educating their children is poverty and the main drop-out occurs with children from extremely poor families. They do not know of any official system that they can rely on in helping them educate their children, although some communes have modest social welfare programmes (such as food or seed distribution to poor families). Families are under great pressure to engage children in farming instead of sending them to school.

Villagers consult each other about these issues but they do not start collective actions. In areas where there were NGO activities they rely on these and express their expectation that NGOs "will stay with them". The level of autonomous civic organisation is low and there is a wide perception that people do not have the power or capacities to do it, that a leader is needed, or that they cannot do it because of their everyday obligations and that therefore they rely on NGOs.

On the other hand, citizens do have some indirect participation in the life and decision making process of the commune councils. This takes place through monthly meeting at the commune councils where issues are discussed with the school, health care centre, police and other institutions. A citizen representative takes part in the meeting and he or she might raise an issue of general concern. However, this institution was highly emphasised by commune council members and NGOs, and not by the citizens

themselves. According to the interviews with NGOs, there seems to be a mediation process taking place in the following chain: citizens and their issues → representatives of citizens at the meeting → commune council and then other institutions. This means that the citizen representatives at the meeting decide what is an appropriate comment or concern to be raised in front of the commune council. They will not raise a particularly controversial issue that might irritate the council. The same deliberation takes place when issues are taken further up the government hierarchy. Indirect communication prevails. All the interviewees emphasised the need to know how to approach things. Some CSOs even provide training to members of the Community Mobilization Committee on how to transmit the messages and concerns of the citizens to the Commune Council in an appropriate way.

When parents face problems with education, such as a request for informal payments for additional private classes or high fees for parking (500 riels per day), they apply individual, not collective strategies. Some of them ask the people who collect money for parking to decrease the prices. They sell their goods or labour to meet these demands or they borrow money from friends and relatives “and then borrow from another to return debts and just like that, in circle” (Interview, February 2014). Often they are under pressure from their children to meet the demands. Sometimes, they just give the children 100 riels or so, much less than required, and hope they will not have problems. Faced with this issue, they say they have two options: pay the informal payment or drop out of the school.

Our sample is too small to lead to an informed conclusion about the level of civic participation in Cambodian society. However, we were able to determine some elements of civic participation in rural Cambodia within the education sphere. The first is that obstacles within the education sector do not create an environment in which wider social activism could take place, unlike access to natural resources, as we shall see later. Secondly, the low economic and social capital of villagers, coupled with existing power structures, creates a series of disincentives for civic activism. Thirdly, the villagers clearly depend on NGOs to facilitate any kind of social accountability practices. In such circumstances, various individual strategies substitute for social activism on a larger scale.

Capacity of commune councils

The commune councils in Cambodia are dominated by the ruling party (CPP). They have limited authority and very small budgets approximating to USD 20,000. Some portion of the budget is allocated to the administrative and travel costs of the commune council. The rest is allocated according to the commune development plan that is supposed to be prepared with some level of citizens’ participation. However, this is not enough to cover the various problems faced by the commune. The majority of citizen claims refer to infrastructural projects. However, the commune itself cannot make decisions on this without the approval of higher levels of government and various technical bodies (e.g. when they want to fill in potholes on the road they need approval from a particular technical institution). A small portion of the budget is allocated to social welfare issues.

The commune council members we interviewed were older citizens (probably all of them 60+) with limited education. Their monthly salary is around USD 25, much less than those at the district level (USD 130-150) and province level (USD 250). On the

other hand, the amount of work they do is disproportionately larger. The community council has one clerk appointed by the Ministry of Interior. Although the role of this person is widely acknowledged it was never mentioned during our interviews.

The role of the community council in solving various problems is limited, partly due to their limited authority but mainly because their budgets are low. Therefore, the community has to approach district and provincial authorities and line departments. We were unable to get any meaningful information from the councilors themselves with regard to this relationship. They claim that the higher levels are responsive and that they help them whenever they can. However, sometimes they face objective difficulties, such as low budgets, and cannot help. Then, of course, approaching national authorities and getting their attention is even more difficult and far out of their sight. Interviews with the CSOs point to a more complex picture. This is elaborated in more detail in section 5.1.4 on good governance. Therefore, it seems that after all commune councils do face difficulties in approaching higher levels of government.

In general, commune council members demonstrated a good understanding of the importance and role of social accountability mechanisms in local communities. As we have no measure of their previous understanding, we cannot assess if there were improvements. However, multiple sources confirm that there was a change in attitude of the commune councils. Of course, the council members themselves were the most vociferous in speaking about change and interviews often referred to previous periods of time when “it was most difficult for anyone to approach the commune council with some request” as opposed to now when they are more responsive (Interview, February 2014). Commune council members also demonstrated a certain level of specific knowledge about various social accountability practices and mechanisms that can be employed by CSOs. These relate to their understanding of community scorecards and other monitoring mechanisms as well as to practices such as public forums. They did not elaborate on these in detail but they relied on NGOs and acted as if it is ownership of NGOs that they fully support.

Instead, they emphasised the monthly ‘Open Monday’ meetings of the council as being a social accountability mechanism. This is a tool established by the government as a regular praxis of the commune council and is a meeting in which various stakeholders, including citizens, participate. The citizens usually nominate a representative to attend because, as one Chief of the Commune Council stated, “they are too busy to come themselves” (Interview, February 2014). Although they did not report that they filtered and mediated the inputs from citizens, as we have already seen, it is usual practice in Cambodia for a body that is responsible for transmitting messages and requests to filter them according to the prevalent sense of appropriateness and danger. For example, the village chief would filter inputs to commune council, and the commune council does the same regarding inputs to higher levels of government and so on. The regular Monday meetings also face the issue of inadequate representation. The representatives for health care, the police, and education are often lower level staff without decision making authority. Moreover, they also filter inputs, requests and conclusions back to their superiors.

[Community mobilization committee]²⁵ sometimes they have very informal discussions. Sometimes they do not need to discuss because they live in the community and know the problems of the communities [...] Sometimes they need not go to the Village Chief, because sometimes they know if they go to the Village Chief ... sometimes they have to, sometimes they don't, but they go to the Commune Council directly (Interview, February 2014).

The research data indicates that there is an understanding and knowledge of the importance and role of social accountability mechanisms and the commune councils demonstrate a willingness to engage in social accountability practices. Their knowledge of tools is basically focused on government sponsored mechanisms such as accountability boxes and public forums, though they also do acknowledge the importance of other tools such as community score-cards. However, the interviews neither indicate widely shared knowledge on specific social accountability skills nor the ability to utilise them. There is little indication that they themselves initiate anything of the sort. Despite claiming an openness and willingness to cooperate with their citizens, the two community councils we interviewed had not established any new mechanisms. Secondary data sources suggest that this is the case across the country.

Since professional and administrative structures are highly personalised, the accountability logic often relies on promises. In numerous cases we recorded that a complaint was raised against an individual – for example a teacher - and there was a group and face to face meeting with the individual and a promise was demanded and given that a particular behavior would be corrected. However, as with other societies or environments where structures are weak, much depends on the personal characteristics of the officials concerned and in this case the personal characteristics of the commune chief and council members have a large influence on their performance.²⁶ This was acknowledged in almost all the interviews and applies not only at the level of commune or school, but to district and province as well.

Good governance

Good governance seems to be high on the agenda of the Royal Government of Cambodia and there have been numerous initiatives endorsed by the Government. Among these social accountability mechanisms and decentralisation reforms have a prominent place. Official social accountability mechanisms include various public forums, social accountability boxes, and provincial accountability working groups. These were explicitly designed to respond to the needs of citizens and to introduce mechanisms that ensure better governance, better public services, and more citizen participation. In this section we will briefly analyse the workings of these mechanisms based on interviews with representatives of commune councils, NGOs and citizens.

Social accountability boxes are boxes in which citizens can put written complaints or requests. This is a widely used mechanism sometimes emphasised by commune

²⁵ Community mobilisation committees are elected by villagers and the process is facilitated by CSOs.

²⁶ One of the commune chiefs frequently drinks alcohol and the citizens complain that he disregards his work, while the other is influential and economically well off and regularly helps citizens (these findings were confirmed from multiple sources).

council members. However, we found that social accountability boxes were often abused in various ways. The most common way was by placing the box inside the premises, or in front of, the Commune Council so that the council could monitor who was using the box. This makes people feel intimidated when using the box. In other cases, it was reported that the Commune Chief kept the key to the box, or that the Commune Council filtered complaints. Moreover, a response takes some time as the complaints have to go to the Provincial Accountability Working Group.

One of the government tools to enhance social accountability was the creation of provincial working groups for social accountability. These were formed as bodies somewhat external to the governance structure, with less power than required to enforce claims, grievances and requests. They are designed to respond to requests and grievances received via the accountability boxes and other mechanisms. Our interviews indicate that the provincial level accountability working groups are also inefficient, and often depend on the interests and preferences of powerful politicians. It is the provincial level authorities who schedule the meetings and they often happen only once a year. A typical response of the provincial accountability working group is described by a CSO representative thus:

The working group calls the line department in charge of the grievance. The department writes a letter to the person concerned and asks for the correction of behaviour. Nobody follows up if the person is changing behaviour. For example, people complain that money has been taken for employing the police officer or enrolling in the police school. The Provincial Governor calls the Chief of Police and tells him people are complaining. The Chief of Police shows him the letter from the line ministry that clearly says this should not be done and the Chief asks for the instruction to be followed. But, they usually do not behave according to the instruction. There is no follow-up and the bad practice continues. (Interview, February 2014).

Internal government accountability mechanisms are also ineffective. It would be expected that parental complaints over the quality of education would be handled by the governing body, in this case the district office in charge of education. However, this is not the case, since (according to secondary sources) the district office does not have enough resources to travel and monitor schools (e.g. money for gasoline, motorbike, *per diems* etc.). For this, and probably other reasons related to widespread corruption, patronage and nepotism, internal quality control mechanisms that could respond to the requests and complaints of the citizens are not effective.

Finally, the community forums organised by the government were not open and inclusive enough but rather were often limited to members of the CPP. Thus, they were regarded by our respondents as an inadequate mechanism.

Changes in the quality of governance were measured against the following indicators: (1) number of changed existing institutions, practices, procedures and (2) number of newly established institutions, practices, procedures. According to our research, no newly established institutions, practices or procedures were established nor were the existing ones changed. None of the existing mechanisms analysed during our research demonstrated the ability to fulfill the purpose of fostering government accountability. The Provincial Accountability Working Group is inefficient in two ways: (1) it does

not meet regularly and (2) it has no real authority. Social accountability boxes and public forums were often used as a means of additional social and political control. These mechanisms were obviously conceived as a series of concessions to international development organisations who were the main drivers of change in the field of good governance.

Social accountability in access to resources

The area of natural resource management is highly contested in Cambodia. Access to natural resources is of crucial importance for the livelihood opportunities of the rural population that accounts for 85 percent of the total population (UNDP, 2007). (Re)distribution of natural resources²⁷ through the privatisation of land and centralised control over those resources that cannot be privatised often unfolds in illegal, or at least irresponsible, ways creating the front line of deep social conflicts. Inequalities in land accession are the consequence of the sudden liberalisation of land markets, combined with an absence of adequate institutional safeguards in the form of laws and effective governance institutions and instruments. The trend of an increasing concentration of landholdings is evidenced through the fact that the fifth of the population with the highest income controls up to 70 percent of all available land, while roughly 20 percent of rural households are landless (UNDP, 2007). Land conflicts have been rising because of land grabbing and the encroachment of large economic land concessions (ELCs), often backed by powerful land speculators who are able to push out weaker and less-informed rural people (UNDP, 2007). Access to common property resources, such as fish and forests, which provide a partial safety net and a traditional insurance against negative contingencies (such as bad weather and poor crops) for the poorest population, is significantly reduced due to encroachment and overexploitation. Without direct and indirect offsetting measures, this concentration of land will contribute to a further increase in inequalities of income and economic opportunities (UNDP, 2007).

In such a context, deep social conflicts are present even if they are often not manifest. Sometimes social conflicts over natural resources develop peculiar forms and dynamics. During our research in the Southern provinces of Koh Kong and Kampot, it became obvious that a class struggle was unfolding over mangrove trees. While actors from the higher class were cutting trees in order to raise the price of newly possessed

²⁷ Access to natural resources and land ownership are marked by specific historical legacies and by recent trends of liberalisation without controlling instruments. The tradition of land ownership is absent in Cambodia. During the pre-colonial period all land belonged to the sovereign. Farmers could freely cultivate the land with the small obligation of paying a token tribute to the ruler. Due to the prevailing subsistence agriculture, the majority of landholdings were small (1-2 ha), but essentially, land was not a tradable resource. French colonial administration tried to introduce the system of private property and formal land ownership (Land Act 1884), but they were not entirely successful. During the immediate post-colonial period, the government continued with the same land system left behind by the French, but this legacy was fully overturned when the Khmer Rouge collectivised all land, erased land records and institutional memories of land. The privatisation of land began in the second half of the 1980s but any claims for land possession prior to 1979 were not recognised. The 2001 Land Law incorporates a number of significant changes and enhancements and provides a better foundation for land administration, land management and distribution. It enables the delegation of land administration from the central to capital/provincial level and charges the land registries with responsibility for cadastral mapping and titling of all State and private land in the Kingdom. It also enables the creation of a single land registry authority with the duty of registering all land in the Kingdom.

land or to start oil exploration, fishing communities were planting trees, supported by international organisations, in order to conserve the fishery resources that are the key to their own survival. Thus, understanding the nature of conflicts and the strategies available to both (or multiple) parties is of key importance in understanding why a social accountability project took a particular form in a particular location, and in examining the true potential of these communities to develop social accountability and the limits and obstacles they face, particularly in introducing an approach designed according to a western template.

The geographical area covered by the research included two communes of southern provinces: Chroy Svay Commune in Koh Kong Province and Tapaing Sangke Commune in Kampot Province. Fishery is a significant economic activity in these provinces, since a major part of the rural population's livelihood rests primarily on this economic activity. Other agricultural activities, such as livestock breeding and paddy production, are secondary activities and for the households from fishery communities mostly serve to bridge the rainy season when it is hard to fish or provides a supplementary income. Therefore, the key problems identified by NGOs and CBOs in these two communes are related to fishing and to the natural resources significant for this industry:

- The grabbing of land and fishing lots through which fishermen lose access to some fishing areas.
- The depletion of the mangrove forests (again due to land grabbing but also to oil exploration) which are natural nurseries and shelters for fish.
- Illegal fishing which exhausts fishing resources due to the use of illegal equipment for excessive fishing (electrical or similar devices).
- The often shallow waterways to the ocean. As the sea coast is very far from these areas fishermen access the sea through narrow and shallow waterways that restrict the time for fishing (only possible at high tide) and pose the risk of damaging boats.
- High pressure on fish resources due to an increase in the rural population engaged in fishing since other employment opportunities are relatively scarce.
- Poor infrastructure in local communities and a lack of sanitation that are posing threats to the population's health and wellbeing.

Perceptions of the key problems are of crucial importance because, as is discussed below, the issue of social accountability mechanisms and practices, is strongly linked (and limited) to the livelihood problems of these people.

The four core ToC assumptions are strongly interrelated and it is neither always possible nor fruitful to fully separate them for analytical purposes. The analysis in this case can be more consistent when they are analysed in pairs: the assumption that increasing the capacity of CSOs for social accountability will enhance their capacity to engage more in social accountability practices (A1), and the assumption that this will increase citizen participation (A3), are therefore grouped together. The assumption that providing support to CSOs to build capacity and to practice social accountability in partnership with local authorities will develop the capacities of local

administration for social accountability (A2) and that this will eventually bring good governance (A4) are also coupled in further analysis.

Capacity of CSOs for social accountability and citizen participation

The first core assumption in the TAF ToC states that providing capacity building and financial support to CSOs will enhance their capacity to engage in social accountability practices. In the project component we researched, capacity building activities were delivered to fishery communities by a single NGO.²⁸ The capacity building was predominantly focused on enhancing the capacities of members of CBOs to advocate for their right to access natural resources and to sustain their livelihoods.

The content of capacity building activities was determined to a significant degree by the NGO's understanding of the kind of social accountability for which capacities had to be increased. Research revealed that their understanding of social accountability contained one imminent controversy which influenced the capacity building of CBOs. This understanding of the concept of social accountability was at the same time too narrow and yet extended far beyond the usual meaning of the concept. The perception was narrow in the sense that the understanding of social accountability was mainly technical, perceived as improved advocacy, increased dialogue between the community and government and a basic monitoring of the implementation of key local policies, mainly the local investment plan. The focus was fully on communication between government and the fishery communities and was within the non-confrontational framework, while attempts to increase the capacities of CBOs, and their members, to expand their independent public space, to recognise and better articulate their social interests, and to further their perception of various ways in which local government should be accountable to them, was mainly absent. As NGO representatives indicated, the basic idea in building the capacity of CBOs in social accountability was to raise knowledge and awareness of their rights and of the significant problems they face, so they could advocate for themselves effectively.

At the same time, the meaning of social accountability was extended beyond the limits of the usual concept because it included activities more closely linked to the livelihoods and economic participation of the target group than to the efforts of 'making government more accountable' to them. This was particularly evident in the focus on activities such as planting mangrove trees and facing the challenges of illegal fishing, but this was done in such a way that it promoted compensation from the authorities for poor services in this area, rather than supporting CBOs to require the government to play a more active and responsible role in this field.

Research findings indicated that capacity building objectives were met in very limited manner and that the first ToC assumption (capacity building of CSOs will increase their capacity for social accountability) was only partly achieved in practice. It appeared that this assumption did not take into account the important intervening

²⁸ The NGO Fisheries Action Coalition Team (FACT) implemented the project 'Promoting Good Governance in Fishing Communities in Coastal Provinces' within the DFGG/NSAC project. Among other things, they worked on capacity building of 8 CBOs in 3 Southern provinces that include around 1800 members, out of which over 700 are women.

factors that can break the linkage between increased capacities and using these capacities for social accountability actions. This is evident in relation to two important natural resources management issues around which project activities were focused: conservation of mangrove trees and prevention of illegal fishing. In both cases increased capacity was perceived as very beneficial by both NGOs and CBOs, but led to increased self-management of natural resources instead of an increase in actions related to the promotion of the accountability of local authorities and good governance over these resources.

In the case of the conservation of mangrove trees²⁹ capacity building was limited to an increased understanding of their importance for the local eco-system and fishery resources. All interviewed members of CBOs clearly stated that this was one of the most beneficial outcomes of capacity building activities within the project. They explained that previously they were not aware of the significance of mangrove trees, but now that they have this understanding they are much better equipped to conserve them and to reverse the process of their depletion by building mangrove tree nurseries and planting trees over relatively large surfaces in the area. They also indicated that the effects of such activities can already be observed, since they can already see more plentiful fish resources in the restored areas. This affected their livelihoods enabling them to catch more fish. CBO members reported that this increased their daily income from two to ten dollars on productive days.

However, in the restricted context, newly acquired capacities did not lead to more effective advocacy and monitoring of the responsibilities and activities of authorities related to the conservation of mangrove trees. On the contrary, interviews revealed quite a strong perception that CBO members cannot expect local authorities to provide effective conservation. There was rather the attitude that local authorities should be informed about the achievement of CBOs in this field, but not be held responsible for the lack of similar action from their side. In this case, capacity building activities lead not so much to the promotion of social accountability but to certain forms of independent, self-management of natural resources. Although this is a very important form of citizens activation, of taking control over certain resources despite the unfavorable circumstances, it was clearly not effective from the standpoint of increasing accountability and good governance in respect of natural resource management.

The case of illegal fishing revealed these distorted effects of capacity building activities even more. This is probably due to the fact that illegal fishing includes more open conflict and has more severe consequences not only for fishing livelihoods, but also because it could lead to harm and loss of life. Local fishermen are often (sometimes 3-5 times per month) faced with illegal fishermen at sea. These fishermen usually come from other provinces and use illegal equipment to catch more fish (one of the most frequent illegal ways of fishing is electrocuting fish with electrical devices).

A formal, legal procedure is defined for such cases but it does not work in practice. The formal procedure is that when local fishermen meet those fishing illegally, they

²⁹ Mangrove trees are very important for the fishery communities. They serve to nurse shrimps, crustaceans, molluscs, and fish. This is why the mangroves are a critical component of fishing industries. The mangrove trees provide a rich source of food while also offering protection from predators.

should inform the local commune chief or council, the fishing administration, or the police. The fishing administration in cooperation with the police should then organise an intervention against the illegal fishermen, to arrest them and legally process the case. However, for various reasons (the formal procedure for approving an intervention is too slow, the lack of human and other resources, the inability of fishermen to communicate with authorities whilst at sea, etc.) this does not happen most of the time. Instead, fishermen are 'authorised' by the authorities to 'arrest' illegal fishermen and bring them to the commune themselves. Once again, a service that should be conducted by the authorities has been transferred to the citizens.

From the perspective of the key meaning of social accountability (as defined in the introductory section), in this case increasing capacities for social accountability would assume an increased awareness among fishery communities about the responsibility of local authorities and fishery administration (which belongs to the provincial government) to act against illegal fishermen and to protect their own local fishermen. It would assume the use of different mechanisms, such as advocacy for improved local authority intervention, or the monitoring of local authority interventions against illegal fishery. Instead, the increased capacity of members of the fishery groups has led merely to improved self-organisation for dealing with illegal fishermen. When they learned how to deal more safely with illegal fishermen, members of fishery groups often classify this as beneficial capacity building. They would even explain to us how deadly encounters have dropped significantly due to this 'new approach'.

The main income in our community comes from fishing. If people don't fish one day, it will affect their livelihood. So it is very difficult when they confront illegal fishermen, but they have to do it, they have no other choice. When violence happens at sea, they normally deal with it directly, by themselves because it is hard to have an intervention from the authorities. Sometimes it is hard to call from the ocean for somebody from the commune, or the approval of an intervention is too slow, or there is no intervention at all. If they are successful, they bring the illegal fishermen to the commune chief or commune office and they can proceed with legal procedure. Illegal fishermen come most of the time from Sihanouk province. Many times our fishermen have injuries from them. But even if they catch and bring to justice illegal fishermen, there is no compensation, no sanction. They are most of the time just banned from the area, but without other sanctions. Usually perpetrators have some high ranking officer behind them so they are not sanctioned. They usually don't come for a few months but then they do it again.

(Representative of fishery CBO, Koh Kong province, Interview, March 2014)

The perceived understanding of social accountability among NGO representatives was presumably the consequence of two sets of factors: the NGO's limited knowledge and experience in the field of social accountability, and the CBO's limited capacities to incorporate social accountability into their primary focus of interest.

The first argument is supported by the history of FACT's work. The organisation was established by another NGO, as a spin-off NGO specifically focused on fishery

communities. The organisation was established in 2005 when members of the parent NGO realised that the specific problems (particularly illegal fishing) that fishery communities face in coastal areas, along the Mekong and around Tonle Sap lake, required undivided attention and support. Therefore, the NGO was relatively new to the field of addressing the problems of fishery communities, but was grounded in a recognition of the specific problems and needs of these communities.

At the same time, the newly formed organisation's experience in social accountability was limited and the understanding of social accountability among CBO members was even narrower (and even distorted). They perceived social accountability only to the extent that it was directly linked to their livelihoods and key problems they faced in their economic activity or everyday life. They recognised the significance of a social accountability approach only when it was related to specific topics, such as the conservation of mangrove trees, the prevention of illegal fishing, deepening the waterway to the sea, or providing sanitation in the village.

It can be concluded that the ToC assumption according to which increasing capacities will lead to a more active role in social accountability should be further elaborated by taking into account the intervening variables, such as structural relations, the authentic interests of citizens and their grass-root organisations and the restricted space for political action. In order to have a more balanced examination it is important to emphasise that investing efforts in capacity building, even with such a limited outcomes is not wasted. New knowledge and skills represent forms of capital that can be accumulated and stored in civil society and bring more benefits or new achievements (in the form of typical social accountability actions) further down the line when other preconditions allow for that capital to be used in new manner.

Capacity of local authorities for social accountability and good governance

According to the second TAF ToC assumption, providing capacity building and financial support to CSOs to practice social accountability in partnership with local authorities will enhance the capacities of local administration for social accountability and this will eventually bring better governance, meaning better policies, practices and performance of local institutions. Research indicated that this was again only a partly effective assumption, bearing in mind the results of the project activities in the provinces observed.

Representatives of local authorities expressed a very limited perception of social accountability. In their view, their main responsibility in the social accountability framework is to 'hear what are the needs and concerns of people' and to translate that into policy proposals that can be negotiated at the higher levels of governance (district, provincial and/or central). They perceive their role as being very limited, and in a way, that the readiness to participate in joint, non-confrontational social accountability mechanisms, somehow fulfills the requirement of 'having responsible authorities'. Representatives of local commune councils and chiefs of commune councils in the communities under research perceived themselves more as linkages between inhabitants of the commune and higher levels of government, than as important actors of local governance with the power and responsibility strongly to influence local services and livelihoods.

The perception of social accountability among representatives of local authorities is limited to providing information to citizens and to collecting information about their problems and needs. The main social accountability mechanism through which this exchange occurs is the public forum that is held monthly with the participation of representatives of the authorities and the commune inhabitants. Besides this, representatives of local CBOs are invited to commune council meetings in order to be informed and to provide information about the needs of local civil society.

Research results indicate that the opinions of local authorities and CBO members on the effectiveness and usefulness of such mechanisms are opposite. Representatives of local authorities consider these mechanisms as a good indication of their responsiveness to the needs of the people and their responsibility to inform them about policies. CBO members consider these mechanisms as formalistic, empty rituals. Interestingly, chiefs of CBOs are somewhere in between these two extremes. They consider these mechanisms as important, but not sufficiently effective. Research findings obtained from interviews with all three parties and observation of one public forum provided more arguments in support of the opinion of CBO members. However, it should be kept in mind that these findings were obtained based on a small number of cases and they can offer only certain analytical, not statistical, generalisations.

Firstly, public forums can serve to provide more legitimacy to the decisions of local authorities, rather than bringing about more participatory policies. This can be evidenced by the cases when the priorities listed by local authorities are significantly different than those identified by CBO members. In one community this was clearly the case, when representatives of the local authority identified a local road as being the top priority selected by people – a priority which was draining all local funds, which were not abundant in the first place - while CBO members stated that the key priority for people in this community, that relies strongly on fishing, is to deepen the waterway to the sea.

Secondly, CBO members clearly perceive the limited role of local authorities and consider it useless to attempt to influence their agendas, since their plans are considered and approved at a higher level of government. This is evident from the mechanisms through which local investment plans (local budgets) are adopted and implemented. Even when the priorities of the local population are incorporated into local investment plans, they can be eliminated at the next stage when all local investment plans are redesigned at the district level. This often discourages citizens and their CBO representatives from taking a more active role in the formulation and monitoring of local plans.

Thirdly, there is a lack of trust in politicians that prevents citizens and CBO members from taking a more active role through social accountability practices such as public forums. They perceive that the loyalties of members of local government lie with higher levels of government and political party, and with the upper classes who expropriate natural resources, rather than with local fishermen and other groups in the rural population.

Fourthly, the way in which public forums are organised gives the impression not of an exchange between citizens and authorities, but rather of the control of the population by the authorities. The public forum we observed during our research, which was

dedicated to a safer village policy, was organised with such a strong presence of the police that it was unimaginable to expect any critical approach or stronger advocacy from civil society. Representatives of local and district police and the commune council presented the nine points of the safer village policy, while citizens were allowed only to pose questions. The presentations from the authorities were welcomed with applause and the atmosphere was more in the spirit of thanking the authorities than in a spirit of discussion.

In the long run, the formal functioning of such a mechanism can cause an outcome completely opposite to the social accountability approach. Organizing local people in CBOs and then controlling them through a mechanism such as a community forum, in addition to other mechanisms, can contribute to the 'capturing of civil society'. This means controlling civil society and channeling its interests and actions in a way that contributes to the reproduction of government and eventually of elites. If we take into account the additional structural factors that determine the nature and scope for action by civil society, this becomes a typical result. Namely, local CBOs could not be established without the approval of the authorities. Their statute was drafted by the fishery administration, and their official registration was postponed for years until pressure was not insufficient. Any meeting of members had to be approved by the police and even very small meetings with three members could not be held without police permission. There are no autonomous spheres of public debates where CBO members and other citizens would have the opportunity to discuss problems and policies. Public debates are captured through public forums, where the opinions of people are strongly influenced by authorities and where authorities have the opportunity to clearly state the limits to social accountability, in the sense of what civil society can require from government.

However, recent history shows that under different circumstances and with proper motivation, CBO members can initiate action in the best tradition of social accountability. In 2012 they organised a protest that lasted for five months and included road blockades. The reason for initiating such an action was land grabbing in the area and restrictions for local fishermen on access to fishing plots. Initially, negotiations were held with local authorities, but with time, they were transferred to district and provincial authorities, and the conflict was resolved by the decision of central government to return the land under dispute to the local community. This case indicates that the capability to act is present in civil society but the conditions under which it will act in particular forms depends on motivation, risks, and the probability of positively resolving the problem. Even if this case was solved to the benefit of civil society, it was more an *ad hoc* response from the government rather than a step towards better government accountability or the promotion of a good governance model.

Conclusions

In this section we provide a basic overview of the TAF ToC, analysing how the theory interacted with practice and to what extent the core and background assumptions were supported by evidence. We will also provide some impressions on the applicability and usefulness of the concept of theory of change itself in the context of attempting to improve social accountability in Cambodia.

When the achievements of a programme are analysed it is important to take into account the broader timeframe within which the programme can intervene and achieve outcomes when working with particular opportunities, risks and constraints. Although the ToC does not explicitly recognise the broader timeframe, our analysis offers conclusions based on the fact that the programme was a limited intervention within the longer term, complex social and political processes. In this sense, a set of significant constraints that exists in Cambodia (as well as in some other societies) were fully recognised and brought into the final conclusions.

Also, it is important to note that insights into the effectiveness of the implementation of the ToC were limited due to the lack of a precise and robust baseline. In order to have better insights into the effectiveness of developing social accountability tools and mechanisms in Cambodia, it would be necessary to have a comprehensive and precise baseline against which the effects of the intervention and the implementation of the ToC could be measured.

Our concluding remarks are presented in line with the key ToC assumptions:

Research findings indicated that within the four-year time span CSOs have increased their awareness about the concept and the forms, tools and mechanisms of SA practices, as well as technical and organisational skills, but their capacity to act as agents of SA remained limited. The reasons for that are the strong cultural and political limitations as well as a limited timeframe and resource constraints.

The research has revealed an increase in the capacities of CSOs in the social accountability framework – they have gained new knowledge on democracy, good governance and accountability in general. In addition, and what is most notable, they have gained valuable technical knowledge on various social accountability tools and mechanisms. However, in this respect a gap can be noticed between CSOs interviewed for the case study in education and CBOs interviewed for the natural resource management component; the latter having a much less developed explicit and precise understanding of social accountability.

On the other hand, this knowledge was not translated into regular actions. The reasons for this are diverse. In the case of CSOs, this is mostly the consequence of the fact that the social interests their social accountability activities were protecting and promoting were not built into their basic organisational structure, either explicitly or implicitly, which reflects core ideological views on how to intervene in the environment in order to pursue the interests of the group. Since these were not typical grassroots organisations, their ability to articulate the interests of the groups they were representing or addressing as beneficiaries, and therefore their capability of carry out authentic social accountability activism, was limited. Their knowledge was mostly focused on technical aspects of social accountability. In a sense, it is a technical knowledge about tools and mechanisms and it was not used for a wider social accountability approach. They were not dealing for example with a widening of the public/political space, which is an issue that is constantly raised in various analyses of Cambodian society as well as in our interviews.

At the same time, the case of fishery CBOs reveals a different pattern of ‘mis-implementation’ of social accountability. Research revealed a particular distortion of the social accountability approach in this case. Their increased capacities in, and

knowledge of, social accountability did not lead to their increased ability to demand accountability from the government. On the contrary, it has led to their increased ability to take over some of the responsibilities of the government. This is a positive outcome of the action as it has led to better protection of the social, political and economic interests of the fishery communities. On the other hand, it has not increased the capacities, responsiveness and accountability of the government. Mainly this was due to the limits posed to social accountability action by the restricted political and social context. On the other hand, the findings indicate that even in such a limited context, when CBO members' interests are more endangered and better articulated, as in the case of land encroachment in Koh Kong province, CBOs are capable of acting through more confrontational forms of social accountability actions in a relatively consistent manner.

The research has revealed marginal improvements related to the capacities of local administration for social accountability.

The interviewed members of the commune council seemed to be aware of social accountability approaches, tools and practices. However, we have not recorded any new initiatives by local authorities, nor a strong commitment to utilising existing ones. This is an obvious consequence of their weak structural/political position that includes a low level of authority, low budgets, and strong political control through the ruling party.

The authorities do however have control over local civil society. This control is manifested in many ways, including authorisation for public events, strong police presence at public forums, issuing approvals for registration of CBOs etc. In a sense, a process of state capture of civil society is taking place that is having a negative effect on social accountability. The non-confrontational approach can further contribute to the persistence of this trend.

Some of the existing social accountability practices further deteriorate the already weak position of local administration. Namely, they strengthen the existing underlying informal power networks (networks of patronage and clientelism). Our research has on several occasions identified various strategies of actors from local administration and civil society that rely on informal networks and familiarity with influential political figures in resolving issues raised during social accountability activities, instead of using the official channels for social and political accountability. Responsiveness within social accountability mechanisms depends on power relations and individual networks, and not on the rules of the bureaucratic game, since the decision making process is highly de-bureaucratized and individualised. Since the structures are weak, individuals and their characteristics play a dominant role. Everyone obeys this and pushing for the solution means pushing through individual networks. Even if the solution is reached, it has been reached at the price of further strengthening informal networks and weakening state structures.

Our research reveals that the social accountability mechanisms initiated by government are not working. While commune councils might not have the authority and resources to initiate significant social accountability mechanisms, this is not the case with national government. And the government has indeed used its resources and initiated a number of such mechanisms. All of them were scored badly by our respondents.

The underlying reasons for weak accountability mechanisms are unfavourable power structures and governance mechanisms. A good example of this phenomenon can be found in the education sector. When grievances were sent to district or provincial level, sometimes even the provincial governor could not take action to impose a decision on the provincial line department because they are accountable to the line ministry. This is not the case if the district governor is a politically influential figure. Here, again, it is the informal power structure and not the quality control and accountability mechanisms that define the processes.

Research data indicate weak potential for civic activism among the citizens and communities interviewed. Except in a few cases of engaging in protests when their basic livelihood was endangered, the prevailing state is one of citizens' passivity and pessimism. The reluctance of CSOs to 'engage in politics' (as a manifestation of political pragmatism in limited political circumstances) does not contribute to an increase in civic activism.

In analysing civic activism we have been using a six-stage model that starts from the most 'benevolent' level of requesting information and ends with pure political activism in the form of public demonstrations (Joshi and Houtzager, 2012). The fieldwork reveals that in all communities we could identify the following activities:

- 1) Requesting information about the level and quality of services, informing citizens about the level of services and their rights
- 2) Monitoring the quality of services actually being delivered.
- 3) Demanding justification, and enforcing legal standards where these are not being met.

However, activities that are more 'political' in their nature were not identified, either among CSOs or in communities where the research was conducted:

- 1) Raising a formal complaint procedure through administrative complaint mechanisms
- 2) Filing law suits against the government in front of the judiciary for not fulfilling its legal obligations
- 3) Holding demonstrations to protest against the poor quality of services

This complies with the de-politicisation of social accountability already defined.³⁰

The only exception we noticed is a five month long protest held by members of the fishery community who were motivated to oppose land grabbing in the area that restricted their access to fishing waters and endangered their livelihoods. Although this protest was not organised from within the project framework, this case indicates that a capability to act is present among citizens, but that the conditions under which they will act in particular forms depends on their motivation, perception of risk, articulation of interests and organisation, as well as the on the chance of resolving the problem successfully. Even if this case was solved to the benefit of civil society, it

³⁰ It should be noted that there was a sense of surprise, discomfort and even fear among respondents when we asked them about their political activism. As one respondent stated: "We have to limit the issues. If we open the law suit many complaint will come, over the district capacity to resolve, it will not be democracy any more but anarchy" (Interview, February 2014).

was more an *ad hoc* response of government rather than a step towards better government accountability or the promotion of a good governance model.

Many of the CSO personnel interviewed rejected the idea of working on protests with villagers whose livelihoods or natural resources were endangered, or of cooperating with factory trade union members. They rejected it with phrases referring to their lack of knowledge and expertise or their unwillingness to get engaged in 'politics'. However, they do acknowledge the fact that these were the social groups able to mobilise and to actively and successfully protect their interests and rights. In other words, they are the drivers of small-scale social changes, albeit ones taking place in an extremely limited public space and under an authoritarian regime.

The research findings indicate that citizens' mobilisation takes place under two conditions: (1) when basic interests are threatened, such as access to natural resources that secure food for families and cattle; and (2) when such a threat to their interests affects many people simultaneously. These circumstances would be primarily cases of land abuse and deforestation, restricting access to natural resources (e.g. lakes and rivers for fishing being polluted, roads and canals being abused) and would often involve big business and government as opponents. Problems with education do not fit this pattern.

In most of cases, we identified a sense of pessimism and low expectations among citizens. Their ability to hold the government accountable is low. The main activities that citizens undertake are those of self-help. They rely on their own ability to resolve their problems and they are reluctant to approach officials for various reasons. Basically, citizens do not feel empowered to approach the government due to the huge gap that they perceive as standing between them.

Interviews with CSOs and members of the commune councils, as well as with other national stakeholders, indicate a strong emphasis on education and on awareness raising that would solve the problem of weak capacity and the unwillingness of citizens to engage with the government. Surprisingly, none of the respondents from institutions indicated power relations as a reason for citizens' passivity. This was only implicitly present in the interviews with citizens. Even when they talked about empowerment they referred to the knowledge-activism nexus, not to structural social and political changes. In that sense, during the interviews the emphasis was on technical issues such as how to organise, facilitate, manage, research, or monitor.

Social accountability practices have led to some improvements in the performance of local administration and public service. However, these improvements were either of less significance or were limited to the time frame of project activities. In the absence of increased government capacity to respond to the needs of the population, citizens were in some cases, such as in the fishing communities, taking over the government functions of providing security and environmental preservation. This self-organisation could contribute in the future to their ability for social accountability activities.

Social accountability practices have led to some improvements in the performance of local administration and public service. However, these improvements were either of less significance or limited to the time frame of project activities. In some of the cases observed, we even identified a reverse pattern: social accountability practices actually led to the taking over of government functions by CBOs, as was the case with fishery communities.

The government bodies we observed were reliant on existing social accountability practices established by various authorities (e.g. community forums, boxes, working groups) and the research points to many weaknesses with these mechanisms. In some cases, social accountability mechanisms were merely strengthening informal power structures instead of improving quality control and accountability mechanisms within the government structures. This, as we have already stated, is attributed to unfavourable power structures.

The research did not identify any new quality control mechanisms or accountability lines established within the government structure that could replace the existing inefficient ones. The interviews with citizens, CSOs and CBOs did not lead us to conclude that there had been any improvement in the ability of the government to provide good services.

The research findings also contributed to a reflection on the background assumptions of the ToC. The background assumption about social accountability being easier to promote at local level was not fully supported. Research indicated that local authorities can be, and are, essentially as distant as higher levels of authorities, due to the fact that their power is limited and their loyalties are still with higher government and party ranks. A focus on local governance can be even counter-productive, because it can enable local authorities to control civil society more easily through CBOs and formalistic social accountability mechanisms. Contrary to this, the background assumption on a non-confrontational approach was realistic, taking into account the structural and political limitations. However, it strongly limited the effects of all actions related to improvements in social accountability, since it does not initiate any changes in existing power relations, nor disturb existing processes of resource capture by the authorities, including civil society. Bearing in mind the limited, or inconclusive, achievements within the project framework with regard to the advancement of social accountability, there were no grounds for identifying any clear indications of a contribution to the development of political accountability. However, this might also be due to the fact that an exploration of this link (social accountability – political accountability) was marginal to the research framework.

In addition to these conclusions there are a few other remarks emerging from the research findings. One is related to the basic TAF project design which assumed a mediating role for CSOs between the donor organisation on one side and more grass-root organisations and citizens on the other. This has proved to be both beneficial and limiting. Beneficial, in the sense that CSOs can fill the large gap between grass-root organisations and donors supporting social accountability because they can provide important support by providing information, knowledge, skills, networking, exchange, and financial resources. Limiting, in the sense that CSOs are not grounded in the authentic interests of groups in the particular community; they appear as external agents and can push civil society initiatives unintentionally towards distorted practices, enabling increased government capture of civil society, rather than protecting its autonomy and promoting more typical social accountability practices.

Our final remarks are related to the use of ToC as tool, concept or approach in development interventions. Such usage is grounded in certain assumptions of its own. One of the key assumptions holds that social change occurs in a relatively firm deterministic way. Therefore, if we know the causality chain behind the change, we could induce the change in a certain (desirable) direction. In this case, the important is

to take into account as many variables as we consider significant for the deterministic pattern we want to influence. If we skip the broader debate on social determinism and we accept this logic for the exercise, there are at least two important potential limits to the effectiveness of ToC:

- 1) A high probability that we are not taking into account all the relevant variables, and therefore applying the ToC in practice will not be effective enough. The argument that ToC should be 'more realistic', based on a more solid perception of factors, contextual restraints and opportunity and chances, is often linked to this restriction.
- 2) A high probability that the ToC will face opposition from the social agents that are often the core subjects of social change proposed in the ToC. This is again linked to the claim for a 'more realistic' ToC. In this case, we are confronting the question of power relations between actors – the proponents of ToC and development interventions on one hand and on the other hand the subjects of change who are at the same time those who approve action.

In the case of social accountability in Cambodia, the limits of the TAF ToC were related to both issues. Firstly, some variables for effective change were omitted from the background assumptions. The variables of structure, which seem very important, are not taken into account sufficiently. Citizens should be taken not as a homogenous group that could engage in social accountability actions, but as various groups that take different positions in a society that is structured in a specific way. Their interests are diverse based on the structural position and for many groups social accountability will be a more visible issue if it is linked with their livelihood. The capability to articulate these interests, to recognise the importance of social accountability mechanisms, and to organise in order to act is strongly related to the structural position of the groups and to the issue at stake.

Secondly, the fact that an intervention needs government approval necessarily limits the quality of the ToC, imposing more acceptable but less effective forms of intervention, that do not bring about the desired change but leave the state to be reproduced in more or less the same way. This is the case for some of the mechanisms for social accountability that have been developed in a partnership relation between citizens and local authorities and that are contributing more to the legitimacy of the neo-patrimonial system and capturing of civil society than to good governance.

In future attempts to promote social accountability and to increase the proactive engagement of citizens, it would be important to take a more diversified approach to citizens and to explore what the various potentials and limitations of social groups in relation to their structural positions, interests and capability to engage in various types of actions.

The restricted political environment of a strong authoritarian regime with all-pervasive patronage networks and a high level of corruption should be taken into account as a key variable that limits all efforts invested in citizens activation in local communities. Alternative models should be explored and piloted, such as the dual empowerment of citizens for action at both local and central levels, or a more indirect

focus on their empowerment through economic participation and human resources development that could strengthen their capacity for social accountability at various levels.

A more differentiated approach to the short-term, mid-term and long-term objectives and the contribution of concrete actions to these objectives would be beneficial. Sometimes it is clear that an intervention will not bring immediate results, but can contribute to the long-term accumulation of 'civic action assets' that can bring about desired change in due course. The time dimension and dynamics should play a larger part in the ToC and in interventions.

The project on social accountability was an important learning experience for TAF and some of the lessons learned from the project are already being incorporated into a new approach to civil society and civic action support developed by TAF and ActionAid Cambodia. The main shift in their approach can be observed in a new strategic focus on supporting democratic processes within civil society organisations, with the expectation that only after democratising themselves, will they be able to require the same from the government. This shift in approach is grounded in another Theory of Change that could be the subject of future research.

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This publication is an output of a research programme funded by UK aid from the UK Government. However, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies



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