

PRELIMINARY DRAFT
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Reaching up, Reaching down
The Role of the Commune in Participatory Development

Marita Eastmond
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With the assistance of:

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Göteborg, 21 March 2000

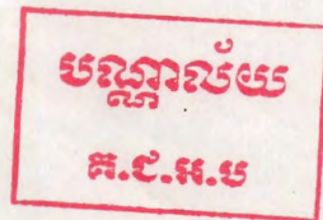
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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Within the CAREERE/Seila framework, in combating rural poverty as well as in its peace-building efforts, the village has been the target area, seen as the main interface between the state and civil society. A number of major changes in the near future challenge the premises of that framework as the commune level is moved into focus as the prime area of interaction. First, as CAREERE gives way for Seila, extending the project to a major scale is being considered, with the point of intersection at the commune level. Second, the commune reform and commune elections will also concentrate attention to the communal authority. CAREERE/Seila is by necessity part of this reform work. One of the concerns that has arisen is how to shift attention to commune without losing the grass-roots, participatory approach that has been the hallmark of CAREERE since its inception. Can the relative success of the CAREERE/Seila 'experiment' be sustained during this transition?

1.2 Aims of the Study

The aim of the study is to examine the implications for the future transformation of CAREERE/Seila in the light of a new development mandate for the commune. The study asks if and under what circumstances the communes can feasibly assume the leading role for the participatory part of a future CAREERE/Seila programme. It considers the historical role of the commune and communal leadership, as well as its present position, at the end of a long and hierarchical chain of command, with little independent management experience and minimal resources. It should be noted that these questions are being asked in a situation where the final design and the details of the commune reform and its legislation are not yet known.

The study also takes into account the central premise of the work of CAREERE/Seila so far, to focus on the village in stimulating participatory forms of economic development and local governance. A key concern is thus the motivation, competence and legitimacy of the commune and its leadership to assume the roles and responsibilities envisaged in its new development mandate. Another is the changing role of the local population, as participants and beneficiaries, as CAREERE/Seila shifts its attention to the commune level. Is it feasible (or even desirable), and to what extent, to safe-guard and stimulate the village participation by the Seila programme? The issues are elucidated through perceptions and assessments elicited from differently positioned actors. To obtain the view 'from above', officials at national, provincial and district levels have been asked to delineate the current mandate of the Commune, and assess its prospects for leadership as envisaged by the communal reform.

Commune chiefs themselves and their administrators have been queried about their current mandate, including their role in development work, and specifically within the present CAREERE/Seila project. Of special interest is their understanding and their reactions to the anticipated changes at commune level. Following this, how is the commune authority, its mandate and performance assessed 'from below'? How are the prospects for village development with the commune as main actor perceived, filtered through the experience of villagers?

1.3 Methods

To explore these issues, we combined quantitative and qualitative research methods. Through semi-structured and informal interviews, we enquired into the nature and capacity of the communal authority and participatory development as perceived by actors at different levels. The study reported here focuses on two communes, one in Battambang and the other in Pursat. Both villages and communes targeted are part of the CAREERE/Seila programme. Within these communes, one village was selected in each commune for a qualitative field study. The selection was made with the assistance of CAREERE staff and management in the respective provinces and chosen on the basis of contrasts with respect to history, demographic and political stability, socio-economic conditions and length of participation in the programme. In addition, a minor survey with a pre-set questionnaire was carried out at village-level in these two communes, plus a non-CAREERE/Seila commune in Pursat. Moreover, two villages in two communes in Siem Reap Province were surveyed. The latter were chosen so as to include one CAREERE/Seila village/commune and one with no such involvement. The survey data were complemented by a small number of qualitative interviews at village-level carried out by the survey team assistants. The questionnaire can be seen in Appendix 1. The fieldwork was carried out during two weeks in November 1999 and comprised two consultants and a survey team.

Given the scant research on these issues in Cambodia to date, the approach is basically exploratory. Also, in view of the limited time in the field and geographical extension, results cannot be seen as broadly generalisable. However, they are indicative of the range of issues involved for consideration by CAREERE/Seila in the changes the programme is facing. Both consultants and the survey team were familiar with the particular circumstances in Cambodia as well as with the CAREERE/Seila set-up.

It is important to note that even though we have extended beyond the area of CAREERE/Seila, the main part of our research have been conducted within its working areas. Thus, as input in the debate on how to transfer political authority to and carry out participatory development from the communes, this is a report drawing on areas where participatory development has been exercised for a number of years already. There are many reasons to believe that whatever possibilities we believe that 'the Commune' has to lead participatory development, it is likely that this capacity is weaker in the rest of the country.

2. Commune and State in Global Context

2.1 The State in Global Context

CAREERE adopted, from the beginning, *decentralisation* as a key strategy for improving government service delivery capacity and as a means for poverty reduction. As it did this, it placed itself within a forceful global development trend:

[Decentralisation] is being considered or attempted in an astonishing diversity of developing and transitional countries – by solvent and insolvent regimes, by democracies (both mature and emerging) and autocracies, by regimes making the transition to democracy and by others seeking to avoid that transition, by regimes with various colonial inheritances and by those with none. It is being attempted where civil society is strong, and where it is

weak. It appeals to people of the left, the center and the right, and to groups which disagree with each other on a number of other issues.

(Manor 1999:1).

Thus, as Manor continues (1999:1) 'Decentralization has quietly become a fashion of our time'. The reason for this simultaneity of decentralisation reforms in various parts of the world is commonly regarded to be the pressure exercised by globalisation. That is, through the undermining of the authority of the central state, wide-reaching reformation of design and working methods are urgently needed; 'dispersion of power' is a core feature in the ongoing transformation of the state (cf. World Bank 1999:1). That is, few states are able to determine their political economy in isolation, but are more or less forced to adapt to the requirements of the international system. For the last decades, this 'globalisation pressure' has meant little for Cambodia, finding their patrons through political alliances within the cold war logic. However, with the increasingly internationalised economy, few reliable political supporters, and a deeper involvement in the ASEAN Free Trade Area, Cambodia progressively resembles other countries with all their problems. This means *inter alia* that the state urgently needs to find new ways of legitimising its existence. However, a nationally determined political economy is not available as a credible development strategy; neither is any external threat to 'the nation' frightful enough to motivate the centralised state. It follows, moreover, from the simple fact that in a democratising country, with 80-90 % of the population residing in the rural areas, that the state needs to have a forceful articulation in these areas.

In addition, in Cambodia, the state has been 'overly' centralised, and the local arm of the government has been delegitimised by a combination of the use of authoritative methods (for military conscription and the recruitment of forced labour) and lack of development orientation. 'Development' was never really the mandate of the commune administrations at any time. In order to strengthen the state, it could be argued, local legitimacy has to be built and the mandate of the local state has to be broadened. In concert with the 'old' idea of commune election, developed into a much more comprehensive commune reform, the notion of decentralisation has gained political prominence and is now (in the spring of 2000), one of the most interesting and far reaching reforms envisaged in Cambodia.

In sum, a comprehensive, well resourced, and thoroughly considered decentralisation reform holds the prospects of achieving what CARERE/Seila has aimed at in a number of provinces: closing the gap between the state and its citizens, thus promoting progressive development.

2.2 Decentralisation, Development and the Cambodian Communes

There is an overall consensus that decentralisation holds promises for achieving increased equity, efficiency, participation and accountability. Not so surprisingly, however, decentralisation programmes are given various designs and have resulted in varying degrees of success.¹ In the case of Cambodia, it is easy to support a decentralisation reform, but specific advice as to how it should be carried out requires much more careful study.² In

¹ There are by now, after a decade of intensive decentralisation experiments all over the world, fairly well documented results on how, what kind of, and with which consequences decentralisation could or should be carried out. To us it seems strange that no donor have been interested in supporting this reform, obviously being crucial in both developmental and democratic terms, beyond support for the legal process.

² One of the lessons of the last decades' decentralisation efforts is that design and degree of commitment is crucial for their success. Decentralisation is not necessarily 'good' in itself.

addition, given the meagre historical experience of decentralisation in Cambodia and the relatively low technical capacity of the local-level administration, one can expect extraordinary difficulties in implementing any comprehensive decentralisation reform.

While it is beyond the scope of this work to account for pros and cons of various decentralisation designs, two typical problem areas need to be spelled out: the first would be the ever present tendency to decentralise responsibility but maintain taxation rights and financial resources at the central level. The second is the belief that accountability and good governance increases by itself through decentralisation; it might very well be the case that local level power structures - which may be a part of the development problem - reproduce themselves in the local government structures. Thus, economic support and/or taxation rights, as well as democratic aspects must come as a part of the decentralisation package. In addition it must be mentioned that a failed decentralisation reform is the best possible outcome for the interests advocating the maintenance of a centralist state, leading us to the conclusion that *if* a decentralisation will be carried through, it must be done properly. If not, it might be better to abstain from it.

As it seems, judging from the 17th of February draft of the 'Law on the Commune Administration',³ the commune administration will be in focus for a comprehensive rearrangement of the local administration, and be given new and larger roles as compared to before. This is both interesting and controversial. Most analysts would, it seems, have guessed that 'the District' would have been the first choice of the RGC for a decentralisation reform: the communes have normally a critically small resource base and little technical administrative competence. With the currently proposed design, the central state initiates a 'deeper' decentralisation reform than most states have. With the relatively scant experience, the *capacity* of the commune administrations to manage a comprehensive responsibility for local affairs can be questioned. Given the role of the commune the last two decades, their role as *legitimate development actors* as well as bearers of democratic ideals, could be doubted. Moreover, the reputation of the commune chiefs (and their low salary), leads us to also question *their motivation* for doing a good job. These are issues that we subsequently will return to.

On the part of CARERE/Seila, the decision of moving focus to the communes is not entirely easy, either. The participation dimension has historically been absolutely crucial for the credibility of CARERE/Seila. The process of establishing the VDC has been thoroughly scrutinized (cf. Biddulph et. al. 1997; 1998; 1999) and much effort has been put into improving that process. In spite of this, broad-based knowledge and understanding in the villages of what CARERE/Seila is doing, and why it is there, have at times been very weak. In spite of this, the role of CARERE, promoting participatory development and local governance, as a strategy towards building peace and combating rural poverty has been generally regarded as successful. However, a number of changes tend to push CARERE/Seila towards a commune focus: a number of reports originating from, for instance, UNCDF, argue that the commune always was (should have been) the real key level of CARERE/Seila (Romero 1999). It must, sooner or later, change from being an 'experiment' and move into scale, ultimately national scale, is the rationale of that thought. Furthermore, in order to adapt to the upcoming administrative reform, the communes seem to be the 'right' level to address. Finally, it does make a lot of sense in relation to the CARERE/Seila ambition of facilitating

³ At the time of writing, the 'Law on the Commune Administration' was available in a draft form, unofficially translated to English and dated 17th of February. The draft had passed the Council of Ministers and was passed to the National Assembly for debate.

the meeting between the state and the people. From this perspective, the commune reform seems to be entirely in line with CARERE/Seila's overarching goals.

So, the pressure on CARERE/Seila to move to the commune level is irresistably strong, although it might be perceived as strange to experiment with one model for a number of years, making it work, and then abandon it for something new. In a vision of the future the CARERE/Seila writes:

'...The commune manages development transparently, equitably, and efficiently to strengthen peace and justice and to make sustainable improvements in people's lives.'

(UNDP/CARERE, 'Seila Local Planning Process' Nov. 1999)

In the new vision of local government, the commune authorities, interacting with civil society, will be the main agent of rural development. The decentralisation reform is likely to be implemented in late 2000 (or early 2001) and to affect rural Cambodia with full force starting mid-2001. This is also the year when Seila will launch its next phase. Obviously, coinciding both in terms of time and aims (strengthening local governance) the two efforts cannot be separated, which creates a highly complex situation. Problems to fully coincide and co-ordinate the two processes open up for an array of middle-range solutions.

The LPP, the key tool for the villages to communicate development visions and plans to the upper levels, has now been simplified and attuned to commune-focussed work, and may serve as a functional bridging between the old and the new scenario. According to the Guidelines for 1999-2000, the overall goal of the new process is to realise the vision for the Seila LPP

'A democratically governed commune where people, civil society, private sector, and government authorities participate in local development. The commune manages development transparently, equitably, and efficiently to strengthen peace and justice and to make sustainable improvements in people's lives'

(UNDP/CARERE, 'Seila Local Planning Process' Nov. 1999)

The new LPP is characterised by its focus on achieving a commune-focussed planning document (CDP, Commune Development Plan) spanning a period of three years, including the highest priorities in each sector with carefully designed criteria for choosing the most needy and motivated villages. Only one of the steps involves meeting with the village, expressed as '...going down to the village to explain the process and prepare priorities with villagers' (*ibid.*). PRA has been abolished; village and commune data are collected through the Commune Data-Base, which is a fairly static and limited document. Village level input is bound to be weakened and less process-oriented. A key, then, is to ascertain legitimate and equitable village representation in decision-making fora.

Furthermore, in the new commune law it is still undetermined what the design of election and representation will be, including the role of political parties and the composition and functions of the Commune Council. However, for our particular purposes two relations are more important than others. The *first* is relation between the new Commune Council and the CDC. This relation is unclear and neither considered in the documentation on the new, commune-focussed LPP, nor defined in the Commune Law. While being, as it seems, self-evident in the communes we have been to, it cannot be taken for granted - especially not if a future CDC

starts making demands on the Commune Council. The *second* extraordinarily important issue is the link between the CDC and village (through VDC and/or elected village chief). The shortened LPP presupposes a well-functioning representation to the CDC. It would also seem to presuppose a dialogue in addition to information, (which is one-way communication) in order to ground the outcome with villagers, ensuring continued involvement and trust in the process, especially when villages are perceiving that they are not receiving 'their due share'. The advantages and drawbacks of the new LPP will become clearer after this year's trial-run.

In the literature, participation and effective management tend to be viewed as contradictory processes (Craig & Porter, 1997:50). This might be a particularly pertinent observation also in this case, given the diminishing resources and increasing tasks of Seila, and that participation is crucial to the CARERE/Seila idea. Overcoming this alleged contradiction might be the greatest difficulty for CARERE/Seila in the next phase. The real challenge facing the Seila model has, thus, to do with its replicability on a national scale and if the thin version of participation, attuned to the commune, will do the job.

3. The Historical Role of the Communes and Decentralised Authority

The readily available and documented information of the historical role of the communes is extremely scanty, and this mission has not allowed for any historical research. The data below are largely derived from secondary literature and interviews with old Cambodians.⁴

The 'commune' was introduced during the French period as a means of strengthening the administrative control and establishing order of the outlying areas. While being established by a Royal Decree 1908 the communes and their commune chiefs did not have a particularly high impact, especially not for developmental purposes. Interestingly, already from the beginning, although the administrative tasks were rudimentary, the establishment of a *mee khum* was supposed to be by elections. As it seems, the commune remained for some time secondary to the village in terms of impact on people's lives.

From 1919, and particularly from 1925, to 1943 the communes managed to establish themselves somewhat more solidly. The stated purpose was to break the administrative deadlock of the country, to bring administration closer to the people, and to free other authorities for other duties (Roome 1998:17). It is reported that during this period the Cambodian communes were existing legal entities, modelled on the French ditto. From the early 1920s, the communes were given their own budget and an administration evolved. With regard to the decree issued in 1925, a 'community council of councilors' ('*kromchumnum*') was outlined where the *mee khum* was its chairman, assisted by his deputies ('*chumtup*'). This body had a particular mandate and was supposed to meet four times a year, and 'decide the affairs of the khum' (Homont, taken from Roome 1998:18). It is also reported, however, that the combination of decrees, central control, and various guidelines, mounted to a rigid central control and that the *Kromchumnum* achieved little.

The turbulent times of 1943 to 1959 caused great uncertainty in terms of local administration, including first a de-democratisation, and latter a French inspired attempt at increasing the local democracy through a circular in 1955. This was later followed by a 'Kram 340 NS of 1 September 1959' that outlined:

⁴ At times, it draws heavily on Roome (1998) and his interpretation of Homont (1961).

'...out of concern to see...people granted true democracy [and] to promote the people to direct participation [in] the affairs of the state./.../This law gives the citizens a right of control over the management of local affairs.'

(taken from Roome 1998:20)

It was, reportedly, drawing heavily on the 1925 experience. It prescribes the election of commune council; however, the gradually harsher political climate of the 1960s prohibited any implementation of the spirit of the reform. It seems, however, that at different times, in different provinces, elections were held for commune councils or commune chiefs. The elections at this time were, however, generally regarded as deeply manipulated (cf. Chandler 1991). The commune election was a one-time event and the reform largely failed, even though the person that was elected tended to remain at his position for a considerable time. In spite of the shortcomings, the reform of 1959 seems to have been one of the major influences of the present reform work.

During the *Sangkum Ryastr Niyum* regime (the Sihanouk regime) the legitimacy, and possibly the presence, of the commune chiefs seem to have been fairly high. Like in the present, however, they were only moderately involved in promoting development and the source for their relative legitimacy was rather their capacity of being the arm of the king (or Sihanouk), than their promoting local development. Tax and data collection were the primary activities, it seems.

The Lon Nol regime kept the commune level but called them *Sangkat* - the term normally used in the municipalities - instead of *Khum*. *Sangkat* carries a more modern association. The Khmer Rouge developed power-oriented hierarchical systems with little resemblance to state administration. The previous commune chief, normally referred to as *mee khum* (which has a positive connotation) was then referred to as *kanak khum* ('the Boss'). The communes seem not to have been explicitly used as a level of administration.

During the post-Khmer Rouge era, the administrative system was, with Vietnamese assistance, strengthened, and the communes, as the 'last' administrative level, was given an important role in the reconstruction and 'grounding' of the state. Interestingly, a commune election was outlined in the constitution and was actually carried out in some places in the early 1980s (cf. Vickery 1986). This seemed, however, to have turned into a political controversy where the 'pro-democracy' advocates lost out, and where the vast majority of commune chiefs remained appointed from above. As during all the other periods, the commune authority became largely an instrument for political control and for mobilisation of both forced labour and soldiers; this was extraordinarily important for the provinces that faced a high pressure from the lingering civil war. The commune level was also a key level in the local defence. This also led to a considerable number of Vietnamese advisers/militaries working on the commune level, together with the commune chief. This served generally, in the eyes of the villagers, to further delegitimise the commune chief.

In our interviews the commune chiefs readily admitted that this was a problem, but the ones we talked to rejected the idea that they still would be associated with the Vietnamese military. The renovation of the state in 1989 ('State of Cambodia'), caused no or few changes in the legal framework or the practical work of the commune administration (except perhaps that the Vietnamese advisers left). Interestingly, the major overhaul of Cambodian constitution and political life arriving with the UNTAC operation in 1992/93 meant little for Commune administration, and virtually nothing for local democracy in the short run. This fact, the lack

of visual impact of the mass mobilisation for democracy during this period, is a common reason for complaints among ordinary people in the Cambodian countryside (at least outside CAREERE/Seila areas).

Until recently, it is likely that people in general associated the communes with state coercion and control rather than as agents for development. However, with the liberalisation, commenced in the mid-80s, but with a real impact as from the mid-1990s, the size and the political pressure exercised from the commune offices seems to have declined considerably. When the war was over, the role of the commune was further softened.

The sub-decree (No 324; MoI, May 10, 1994) outlining the responsibility of the communes is indicating a concern that the coherence and loyalty of the commune offices are declining. It reads that:

Since the Cambodia Government has been formulated, it is observed in general that the commune authorities within some provinces seem to be reluctant to perform their duties and tasks, and their commitments towards the responsibilities in managing the administration, public security at local areas have [loosened]. The main reason of these [problems] is that they are waiting to see the election of commune [authorities] as prescribed in the National Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia.

Ministry of Interior, Instruction No. 324, May 10, 1994.
Unofficial translation

At the same time another instruction was issued, expanding and partly re-interpreting the roles and responsibilities of the communes. While administrative and security tasks are upheld, new duties are added which resonate with the discourse of development introduced with the new post-war government. Thus, the commune chief is responsible for 'overall management'; the deputy responsible for 'public security', the second deputy is responsible for the commune economy; the third deputy promotes 'social works, health, sanitation, culture and religion'; and finally, a commune assistant support with secretarial matters. Overall, the commune administration are vested with the following 'key functions':

1. Keep up general security with the assistance of the police and the military;
2. Disseminate and implement Royal Government policies: (now of a more diverse nature than in the past?);
3. 'Encourage' people to earn a living or get an occupation;
4. Manage statistics;
5. Supervise village chiefs

Ministry of Interior, Instruction No. 008, May 10, 1994,
Unofficial translation

These formal instructions tally fairly well with the general understanding held by the commune chiefs. A few things are worth noticing though. The first is that there is an element of 'development' in these instructions and, as it seems, this development mandate is started to become upgraded in the communes. Secondly, asking at different positions (village, district, and commune chiefs, civil servants at the province, development workers etc.) variations of the above appear, although they circle around the same theme. Thirdly, at no commune we visited they acknowledged that they had written instructions, although the above is explicitly instructed to be distributed to the communes.

Suspensions of what the 'real' purpose of the reform is, are abundant (cf. Cambodia Daily, issue 91, Nov. 6-7). However, the signals we have received and the commitment we have met, indicate that the reform ambitions are very real. In addition, reading the instructions for the commune authority above, it becomes evident that the Ministry of Interior has been concerned with the efficiency, loyalty and motivation of the commune authorities for a long time already. It seems as the reinvigoration of the state apparatus is a purpose solid enough, which, in addition, conforms with trends observed elsewhere.

4. The Commune as perceived from above

The communes are in focus in both the commune reform and the reformation work within CARERE/Seila. Crucial to the possible success of the changes are of course which expectations that rest with the communes and which support they are regarded as needed. Below, we will review how the communes are viewed 'from above'.

4.1. Perspectives and Experiences from the Central Level

As we noted above, one of the flip sides of decentralisation is that the central level 'gets rid' of the responsibility of a wide range of tasks, thereby placing an unrealistic burden on the local levels without compensating them sufficiently. Given the small resource mobilisation capacity and the limited technical administrative competence with the communes, we can ask why the commune at all was chosen as the focus of this reform. Posing this question to the Ministry of Interior, the immediate reply was that 'the communes represent the lowest administrative level', and thereby have the greatest chance of relating, and being accountable to, the people. Additional reasons stated are that the decentralisation reforms draw heavily on the relative success of the CARERE/Seila experience, emphasising the need for 'bottom-up' processes and working on the local level. While the communes have historically never had the kind of role which is being outlined in this reform, the focus on the communes nevertheless falls into the historical pattern of having the commune administration do the difficult grassroots work.

The Ministry of Interior, the architect of the reform, is aware of the present lack of capacity and motivation that plague the commune authority as well as bothered by the possibility of a local legitimacy deficit. This will be addressed, the MoI claims, through the combination of the fact that the Commune Councils are something entirely different than the present commune authority (in that it will be driven from below by the electorate), and that the technical capacity of the communes will be raised through a capacity-building package that will be applied. Still, the MoI expects, this will not be a one-time event, but a drawn out process before the reforms works with full force.

Structurally, local resource mobilisation might be a problem (even though the commune chiefs themselves are generally less concerned with this, see below) due to the combination of the (generally) small size of the communes and the limited resource base. It is already envisaged that, as a future reform, commune mergers are on the agenda. More concrete and short-term remedies are, however, also outlined by the MoI. The most direct source for financing the activities of the Commune Councils would be a 'development fund' earmarked for development activities of the communes. The Ministry also foresees that the communes

would both be given certain taxation rights and a share of the national revenue. These measures are, however, unclear to their substance so far. There might be a tendency discernible to leave the communes only with the right to collect the small 'charges and fees'. As we shall see below, the higher levels of administrations expect the reform to be an efficient method for increased tax collection capacity, rendering the commune authorities to send money upwards in the system, while the commune themselves generally expect to get financial support from above. This possible mismatch might grow into a crucial issue once the reform is launched.

Another important feature is that this reform creates 'a second layer of government', which is said to be independent from the central level. Thus, it shows a lot of confidence for the commune authorities and the local communities to work it out. Overall, the reform is comprehensive and far reaching and breaks with the modern political history of Cambodia in a number of ways:

- The central level 'gives away' power without being forced to do so, or being (directly) compensation for it
- It breaks with the traditional habit of disregarding lower levels as ignorant and incapable
- A local government is created at the commune level with distinctly different functions and different working methods than they have been trusted with before
- It contains features aiming at a substantial deepening of democracy without any crisis triggering the change.

In sum, the central level seems to expect that the communes, through the commune reform will solve or contribute to solving the national problem of state coherence and rural under-development. It trusts that the commune authorities will be able to meet the challenge of being a 'second layer of government', although it may take some time before they are 'ready' to fulfil the expectations. The MoI seems to be sincere with the decentralisation efforts and to be prepared to back up the reform, although it is unclear to what extent financial resources will be added.

4.2. The Communes Viewed from the Province Level

At the province level – as well as the administrative levels below – all civil servants we talked to were very positive to, and constantly stressing the importance of, the CARERE/Seila intervention. Consequently, there seems to be a solid conviction that decentralisation is progressive and desirable. It is, however, not always clear what it might entail. The commune reform is, if it eventually fulfills the ambitions of its lawmakers, fairly radical and demands the reversal of previous thinking in many respects. One knowledgeable source in the province administration said that 'Nothing like this has ever been tried before in Cambodia; it is the first time ever that money will be floating *down* in the system.' However, not everybody agreed with this interpretation of the reform, but rather referred to how it was 35 years ago when the commune authority successfully collected taxes, and sent it upwards in the system. Some rightly pointed out that there are some public services that could not be provided from the commune,⁵ implying that if the commune were allowed to collect taxes some resources

⁵ At the time we visited Pursat, there was a severe flooding and the province authorities were involved in costly support work.

would flow upwards in the system. Some, again, avoided to talk about the taxation issue, indicating that it was a contentious one.

Another topic for discussion was whether this was 'deconcentration' (delegation of powers and functions) or 'decentralisation' (lower level independence); some were hesitant as to whether the strict version of the latter actually was intended, disclosing a mistrust for the commune authorities to manage this. It was also aired that the decentralisation in the CARERE/Seila guise was actually launched from the province and now the national level was retaking the initiative. A possible rivalry for initiative between provinces and the central level is possible here; according to the new law the communes are answering to the central level, not to the districts and the province as before.

In spite of this, the provincial representatives we talked to were generally in favour of the reform:

'The commune authority has previously been used for forcing people [to do various things]. Now we do not need to do that anymore; now we need development. We need to change, so we are prepared to change.'

This does not mean that they see no difficulties. The recurring theme was the technical capacity in the communes, and especially their capability of dealing with the finances. Currently, the system tends to be such that the commune chiefs hardly separates his own economy from that of the public; that may not necessarily be a sign of corruption, but rather lack of a 'book-keeping culture'. This is a practical matter that the province authorities believe can be solved. Here, CARERE/Seila has largely been successful through applying 'on-the job' training extended over a number of years and with substantial back-up.

Another difficulty could be visualised through the changing relation between the commune and the district. Firstly, what will the district do under the new reform? The most reasonable idea seems to be that it will be providing technical assistance to the commune administration. This would mean that the 'higher' level (the district), being used to issuing orders and instructions, will be acting on the initiative of a 'lower' level (the commune). This is anti-thetical to prominent features of Khmer bureaucratic culture. Consequently, some provincial people argue that the *real challenge* is to internalise a mental change with the civil servants; under the new law, the logic is basically one where upper levels serve the lower ones and the commune authority serves the people; a relation rarely seen in Cambodia.⁶

Some went as far as saying that 'for us in the Seila provinces there will not be so much of a difference'. Interestingly, the participation from the villages (threatened by the focus on the commune in the reform) was defended in several interviews on the province level, although nobody outlined any major incompatibility between the present Seila set-up and the anticipated changes. It was widely assumed that the CDC would, one way or the other, be a part of the package, or even a crucial resource for making it all work. The further 'down' we came in the system the more it was pronounced that 'before' the communes had to deal with 'authority' and 'security', and that this was not the case anymore; instead they should move to

⁶ On a direct question on whether this reform was culturally impossible to bring about, a high ranking civil servant smiled, agreed to some extent, but continued to answer with the summary of a well known folk-tale: 'Achei is the son of a poor family. He is fooled by a rich family, but through wit and smartness he overcomes his problems. He is repeatedly facing lies and deception by powerful people, but he always wins. Even after he dies, he wins.'

development planning. This, it was argued, was bound to happen given the new situation, commune reform or not.

The role of women in the new set-up could be expected to produce two contradicting processes: the first would be that the change of focus from the village to the commune is likely to lessen the chances for women to be a part in the important decision-making structures. Although women are fairly well represented in the VDCs, rather few women are chair(wo)men of the VDC and attend CDC meetings. To counteract this, some kind of quota-system would need to be introduced (which it already has been at certain places). The second process that might be set in motion is that in the long run the probability of women to directly vote for their preferred candidate, and also to be elected themselves, will increase, given that in essence the commune reform will both take the state closer to the people and increase democracy.

4.3. *The Communes Viewed from the District Level*

The district is the administrative level that is most weakly developed/engaged in both the CAREERE/Seila set-up and the commune reform: in the CAREERE/Seila set-up, the district has largely played the role of a 'host' and facilitator in the 'meeting' between the communes and the province. In the commune reform, as noticed above, the role of the district, the lowest government level with technical capacity, is unclear and possibly reduced to a provider of technical assistance and/or monitoring functions.

These changes are interesting. During the last decades, it could be argued that the district was the key state level, massing the most forceful combination of the local level contacts and administrative technical competence/military power. Moreover, during 1999 a power sharing agreement – a fiercely resisted change as late as 1996/7 – between CPP and FUNCINPEC for the leadership of the districts was struck. In combination it seems like the events noted above will serve to thoroughly change the role of the districts.

The district leaderships we talked to show, however, no or little resentment against the outlined changes in the administration and they were onesidedly positive to the Seila approach to development. In reality, at present, the relation between district and commune is far away from what has been foreseen in the commune law. As an otherwise not particularly authoritative district chief put it,

'The communes acts on our oral instructions. We meet at the district office once every week. The commune chief reports and the district chiefs make decisions. If they do something wrong the district chief calls them and instruct them, and if that does not help, we report to the province who might dismiss him'

Another district chief said he was worried because at the end of the day it is the districts that '...have to consolidate the new structure and the work of the communes.'

Another interesting observation is that in all districts we visited, a fair number of the commune chiefs had been replaced the last couple of years, either due to old age or because they were not fit to deal with the new conditions. If this is the overall pattern, the break with the previous period might be somewhat easier than commonly expected. Confusion at the districts of the consequences for them of the coming reform are quite large though.

Speculations about what they will do range from 'monitoring' to 'technical services', and from 'consolidating' to 'controlling', calling into question the viability of the commune as a 'second layer of government'. Even development workers with great confidence in the commune authorities' capacity to manage their new tasks, balk at the idea of an independent commune. This will not change over night.

5. The Commune Authorities' Self-perception

In the 1980s and at least until 1992, commune authorities were pre-occupied with local security. 'What we needed in the commune leadership at that time was strong military persons' one commune chief told us. The commune chiefs recruited people for the army as well as for occasional forced labour. Another commune chief commented, 'Then [in the 80s] people were afraid of me. They ran away when they saw me. I do not have that problem anymore. People are not afraid anymore'. An ex-commune chief said that: '[in the early 1980s] it was difficult. Sometimes we had to force people. Then people were afraid of me, but I had to [do it]. I was the hammer that hits the nail.'

To our surprise, the commune chiefs we interviewed generally spoke freely about their role in the past and the dilemmas they faced at certain times. Some readily admitted that they used to be very unpopular and even feared, and that they had used 'power' in relation to the villagers – which they did not particularly like. However, they mostly added that this was a passed era and that people had forgotten. Whether people have forgotten or not is as yet an open question, and seems to vary widely (see below). At several times it was spontaneously noted that now, new skills are required. Some commented that 'Some old commune chiefs might get problems, but hopefully they have people around them who are more capable'. This was paraphrased by a province governor claiming that some old rascal commune chiefs have by necessity been 'promoted' to the district level to work with administrative tasks. While in their own interest to emphasise the change, the general consensus on the irreversibility of this change of attitude in the communes is remarkable.

In contrast to the rather authoritarian attitude of the district chief above, the commune authorities on several occasions claimed that they are fully capable of managing their own business. One said that one of the major insecurities in the commune, making long-term planning impossible, were the demands and unpredictability of the provinces. Another said, even stronger, that: 'I guarantee that I can govern the commune myself. I do not need the district for anything./.../The only thing they do is passing orders from the province level.'

What seems clear is that with a changing mandate, the commune chiefs view themselves, often with seeming relief, as having the chance of assuming a very different and more popular role as compared to before.⁷ Today, *development* is an important priority with the chiefs we interviewed, on par with other tasks pertaining to *authority* (legal, security and administrative duties). The attitude to which some commune chiefs gave voice may be phrased as 'Development first and authority second'.

Contrasting Seila and non-Seila communes (but in Seila-provinces), we found that the change in relation to the 1980s was obvious in both kinds of communes. However, the difference was that development in Seila-communes has a content (although not necessarily of a kind we

⁷ 'Before' is in Battambang, before the war ended (i.e. 1997), while in Pursat (and other less violence-stricken areas we suppose) 'before' tend to be before 1993 when the first election was held.

would prefer), meaning that 'development' was a living process, something concretely experienced by the local leadership, and possible to have visions about. Also in non-Seila communes the commune chiefs were keen on being seen as focussing on development, although when asked what they meant with 'development', they fell short of an answer in spite of being indirectly 'socialised' into the CARERE/Seila approach and exposed to the idea of 'participatory development' for a number of years. Imagining the commune chiefs entirely outside the CARERE/Seila provinces and with no exposure to 'development', it is likely that to carry through a reform of democratic decentralisation is even further problematic. This might be a disturbing observation in light of the discussions of involving a large number of new communes in the year 2000, and 'moving to scale' in 2001, which may mean an arduous process of learning, at best; at worst, implying too far a stretch to go in too short a time.

A common point of departure in the debate in Phnom Penh on the capability and motivation of the commune chiefs, is that they are all thugs, and that any democratic, development-oriented reform is bound to fail. A more constructive assumption might be that the commune chiefs (as humans in general) are rational agents, acting on various incentives. The overall pattern would then be that in the 80s it was 'safe' to be tough against the villagers from the side of the commune chiefs since they were, after all, on the same side, with the common enemy in the forest, attacking at night. When the war finished, however, too tough a stand against the villagers would risk to marginalise the commune chiefs from the people at the same time as they experience waning support (through economic liberalisation, increased democracy, bottom-up practices on the rise etc.) from the upper levels, thus ending up with no solid support from any quarter.

As it seems, decentralisation, in the CARERE/Seila form or in the new form as far as they have been informed, makes a lot of sense for them: it draws development resources to their communes; it increases their room to manoeuvre without making them lose authority (authority might even increase due to heightened legitimacy); they establish a more 'normal' relation to their fellow villagers; they get rid of some of the duties from above; their status might change from one of a local 'thug' (or *kanak*) to a 'real' civil servant (traditional high status position) or a caring local leader; finally, they may even get a more substantial taxation right. From this point of view, the keen interest in both the decentralisation reform and the increased focus on the commune can only serve to improve the position of the commune authority.

Leadership and legitimacy constitute core issues, for the local population (see further below) and for the commune chiefs themselves. Interestingly, the two images implied by 'authority' and 'development' might be converging: The commune chiefs themselves seem to want to combine firmness with gentleness, where the former is the familiar and thus more 'natural' one, and the latter is more demanding, forming part of the parental dimension of 'caring'. The commune level leadership constitute the point of intersection between local population (civil society) and state authority, in a way that district and province leaders do not. As a *mee khum* (mother [of] commune) the metaphor of the good parent is a popular one (cf. *mee phum*, mother [of] village). Interestingly, *mee srok* or *mee khet* (mother [of] district and mother [of] province respectively) does not really seem to make sense, especially not the latter. As such, the commune leadership may assume the role of combining the authority of the state with a more care-taking role of local leadership (the paternal ideal seems more often to be connected to the village chief or *mee phum*).

The commune chiefs are fairly well informed about the elections, and are aware that they will be accompanied by a thorough commune reform including a political pluralisation, they have as of yet, understandably, no detailed information on this. They are also aware of that this implies a new role for them. However, in no instance was the commune reform opposed, or even criticised, whether discussed with the local intelligentsia, the local political opposition, district or province officials, or with people at large. On the contrary, there seemed to be a general expectation, even an eagerness, to see the commune election and commune reform happening. In spite of us repeatedly trying to provoke a reaction to this, commune leaders were extremely cautious in expressing future personal political ambitions. At present, there are few incentives to become the commune chief; the salary is extremely meagre even though that is partly compensated by the commune chiefs taking a share of the charges and fees the people have to pay for various services. However, there is also a discussion going on that in the future, the commune might get the right to collect taxes, leading to that considerably larger sums might be passing through the commune office, and that there will be less demands from above.

In spite of not being too clear about their future role, commune leaders appeared confident both in terms of their own capability in running the commune, in their prospects of remaining/becoming popular and thereby being elected (and in one case at least, in having the necessary resources 'from Government' to do the job). Even when confronted with some of the seemingly overwhelming difficulties which the new Commune Law will impose on the commune administration, they reasserted that "they could do the job".

6. Communes as Viewed from 'below'

6.1 *Village Background*

A view from the village was gained through a closer, qualitative study of two villages, one in Battambang and the other in Pursat. They differ in particular with respect to demographic and political stability in the recent past as well as socio-economic conditions, thus posing very different challenges to commune leadership. Whilst the Pursat village is into its second cycle of CARERE/Seila, whose presence is noticeable throughout the village, it is only starting out in Battambang. Open-ended and informal as well as semi-structured interviews were conducted with villagers of different socio-economic strata. VDC's and Village Chiefs were also interviewed on several occasions; where relevant, monks and local NGOs were also queried. Also spontaneous meetings with groups of villagers, around the shop or the gambling table, were used to elicit their experiences with respect to the relations between commune and village. The data are matched against preliminary reports of the survey team, including selected informal interviews which the team carried out, in two other villages in same Battambang commune; as well as in the same village in Pursat province. They also include data from a village in a different, and non-Seila, commune in Pursat.

The Battambang village has a history of political unrest, suffering until recently from occasional Khmer Rouge presence, and now involved in conflicts over land and fishing rights. It is described as remote and the poorest in the commune, with land shortage and frequent droughts or flooding. Wealth is unevenly distributed; ownership of rice land ranges from 0 – 8 hectares, with an increasing concentration in the hands of a few families. The rich families are said to continuously raise the interest rate, forcing indebted people into what some refer to as *toil chork* (literally, blocked passage, a dead end) and having to sell their land. The social and geographic marginality of about 30 returnee families, physically living outside the village and

still without any rice land of their own, is conspicuous. Many such families have already moved on hoping for better opportunities in newly opened reconciliation areas. Returnees seem not to intermarry with 'old' residents, engage in other village activities, or attend village meetings. The village chief has not taken an active interest in changing the situation, referring to the higher authorities. The commune chief reports to us that he is currently trying to negotiate previously unsafe communal land held by the military, which he claims he wants to distribute to returnees but is awaiting approval from the Province authorities and the outcome is uncertain.

The Pursat village is demographically stable, without major conflicts, although hit by floods from time to time. With its sixty or so families, the Pursat village appears more socially integrated or at least less conflict-ridden. Most of the respondents have lived in the village all their lives, there are few newcomers 'since Pol Pot days', and many are related through kinship. Even so, the ideal of family independence is still strong, but the ease of borrowing also between unrelated households seems greater than in Battambang. They describe themselves as having a history of 'unity, mutual help'; one of the reasons, someone claimed, is because 'people obey buddhism' and that more than other villages, they like to make ceremonies and visit the pagoda. This was especially marked as the study coincided with *Katann*. The commune chief ranked it as one of the top villages economically in the commune. The distribution of resources is fairly even (rice land ownership ranged from 0-2 ha, with a large number of medium-range owners). There are also many complementary sources of income such as fishing and palm sugar, with accessible markets nearby. It was visibly well provided for by different agents of external assistance. Well into its second cycle, CARERE/Seila is reported by villagers as well as the village chief to have made a noticeable impact on living conditions, especially in the areas of road construction, water and agriculture.

6.2 Relationship Commune – Village

The commune is largely a territorial and administrative unit, incorporating a number of villages. It is not a social entity in the sense that villagers identify with 'their commune'. Whilst there is considerable interaction and many social ties between villages, through marriages, the pagoda committees and rituals, and through villagers working the rice land, or borrowing money, of people in other villages, there seem to be no occasions when villagers come together as a commune or share a sense of communal solidarity. Only about half of the respondents at village level (even long-time residents) knew how many or which villages that form part of their commune today. People's sense of belonging is primarily with the village, even if, compared to rural areas in other neighbouring societies in Southeast Asia, the village does not either constitute a bounded and cohesive community, forming the basis of solidarity (Thion, 1993). The loose entity of villages surrounding a Pagoda, constituting the moral centre of rural areas, may be a more or equally relevant emblem of collective identity (for instance, boats of the water festival may carry the Pagoda names and the villages it represents). Even so, with the greater focus on the commune in future, including elections and the workings of a commune council coordinating local development of its constituent villages, the commune may become a more relevant unit in the rural social landscape. Not being represented in the Commune Council may then be a contentious issue for villages not gaining a seat.

Relations with the commune authority in the past, as we could see from Chapter 3 above, were largely of a negative and demanding kind, from the point of view of a villager: the commune was associated with control and coercive mobilisation for causes that took people away from their own, more immediate concerns of making a living and sent them off as soldiers or as forced labour for some larger project. This role of the communal authority in the past was particularly alive in the social memory of the population in Battambang. The social distance to the commune office perceived by villagers generally is also related to the fact that, in its present functions, it appears to be of little direct relevance to people's everyday lives. For them, the commune does administration and keeps law and order, and to a lesser degree it is understood to be involved in 'development'. Obtaining a marriage licence or resolving a conflict which cannot be dealt with at village level, are the two most common reasons given for villagers' contact with the commune office. The normal and proscribed route in such legal matters is anyway to first approach the village chief (also preferred as it is usually the less expensive one: the commune office may charge 'fees'). Nevertheless, the desire and even expectation of local leadership (village as well as commune) to work for 'development' and supporting their communities was clearly expressed, although faith in their capacity to do so at present was less strong and also varied with the experience of different villages.

The other point of contact between villagers and the commune chief is during his visits to the village. With varying frequency, the *mee khum* goes to meet with village chief and, on occasion, to provide information to the villagers, sometimes related to 'development activities'. The commune chief in Battambang is new, appointed in the interim period awaiting commune elections. It is the third commune chief in a short time, which perhaps reflects the political instability of the area. Far from all villagers know his name (women less often than men; returnees less often than 'old' residents). His legitimacy seems to be rather low, although this varies with social strata of the respondent: the more well to do, with less social distance to village/commune authorities, appear more positive. The attitudes of others seem to be neutral or cautiously positive. Two categories appear, however, highly critical. The first is a category consisting of people with some education, who have had closer contact with the commune office. The other would be farmers/fishermen who are suffering the loss of rice-lands and fishing rights. The recurring charge against local leadership is that of nepotism and 'working for their own interests', including allegations that commune authorities are implicated in the sale of fishing rights to private businesses.

The legitimacy of the commune chief is more clear-cut and not as clearly differentiated by social categories in the Pursat village. The chief had been in office for two decades and is known by both men and women in most of the households. He visits the village regularly; very often recently due to the flooding. He is said to like talking to 'ordinary folk' and his knowledge about the village's condition is widely appreciated. He is also more closely associated with 'development', especially as represented by 'the Organisation' (primarily Seila).

6. 3 *The Changing Role of Village Chief*

The commune chief is also formally obliged to visit with the village chief, as part of his supervisory role in the formal chain of command. In Battambang, the village chief is an old-timer, appointed in 1979; the one in Pursat have been in place since 1990. Neither are members of VDC, but one holds an advisory position, the other failed to be elected. Both, however, are held in rather low esteem by the villagers, seen as lacking motivation and

competence enough to play an active role in village affairs. In villagers' views, a good village chief is one who looks after villagers' interests, supports and guides them. He should 'know the situation of the village, and help connect village to the outside for assistance'. Thus, much village resentment focuses on nepotism, favouring his own relatives, for instance providing them access to communal land or adding them to lists of MPP projects.

Some of the previous bases of power are disappearing for the village chiefs, such as the allocation of state resources (in the planned economy) and the forced recruitment of villagers (a loss often as welcomed by village chiefs as by villagers). Also, the function of distributing land has shrunk with the new system of commercialisation. Particularly in the Battambang village, with the pressure on land, the village chief's actions in this respect were contested, creating jealousy and conflicts. The transition, in the absence of a clearly defined role, a changing basis of authority, and a new set of expectations on performance, is difficult for some of these appointed officials. The chief in the Pursat village, when asked about his duties, listed promoting development as the first priority. They also included 'calling villagers to meetings encouraging people to work, rather than wasting their time'; and resolving domestic conflicts. However, reflecting on the changes for the village chief since 1993, he feels it is increasingly difficult to fulfil these duties:

'Before, it used to be easy to ask people to do things/... /people listened. Everyone used to come to meetings when called... not so now, unless they get 'cake to eat' /.../You cannot order people today, you have to persuade them!'

He regrets that the village no longer has village groups 'to assist him', but 'only VDC', who seem to act independently and is critical of his inactivity. Squeezed between these new expectations on his position and his lack of power to command, he has asked to resign and is still waiting for a reply.

6.4 VDC: the Broker Position

There are, without a doubt, areas in which village chiefs have assumed the partly new role opened for them with the introduction of VDC and the development agenda, with commitment and probably some success. In contrast, the examples of the present study suggest a different outcome, a polarisation between village chief and such new bases of authority as represented by VDC; here, village chiefs have *not* been able to adapt to changes in his functions and demands on his performance.

In this case, a competent VDC can indeed make up for, and may even challenge, weak village leadership.⁸ Even if the village chief had been active in selecting the VDC candidates, as in the case of one village, this did not discredit the VDC members, who were seen as competent by the villagers who elected them. Many active VDC members seemed to be drawn from relatively well to do and informed strata, probably a pre-requisite for supporting their volunteer involvement. It may also give them a certain clout with respect to the village chief. In Pursat, for instance, the female deputy chief of VDC claims that her position, backed by the VDC, enabled her to challenge the nepotism of the village chief at a meeting on behalf of angry but quiet villagers. In Battambang, the VDC chief (also the deputy village chief) was active in mobilising his own and neighbouring villages to regain fishing rights, a fight they

⁸ In the Pursat commune, ten of the 13 villages had elected their village chief as VDC-chief. In the village studied, the chief was one of those who failed to be elected.

said they are prepared to take through all the instances, '...up to Phnom Penh, if necessary.' Even if motivation is necessary, it is not sufficient. This VDC, new and inexperienced, regret having missed a project because of inadequate planning, but claim to be learning their lesson and trying again next year. In Pursat, the village has recently voted in its 3rd VDC chief, after a series of less competent persons on the post. The one just voted out office explains his great problems in justifying to villagers why the priorities of their village had been rejected. As these and many other cases show, learning the ropes takes time and having the chance to make mistakes and get back on track or letting someone else try is important.

To villagers, the VDCs are associated with development. 'Development' or *akphiwat* is clearly within the worldly and material sphere of things. It often refers to the concrete and visible changes that have been implemented in the village in question; sometimes, it is referred to in more abstract terms such as 'increasing the standard of living' or 'helping against poverty'. It is a good (defined as help, assistance) emanating and controlled from the outside, usually 'the Organisation' (*Angkar*), seen working with (and sometimes keeping a check on) local authorities, and to varying degrees brokered by the VDC. People also make associations to 'development' outside of the sphere of material improvement, but more indirectly, such as the role of organisations controlling or improving the practices of local authorities, i. e. relating to governance.

The VDC and Seila structure has facilitated the mobilisation of villagers for communal goals, claims one VDC-chief when comparing the village with pre-Seila times, '...because they see that it benefits themselves and contributions for such causes are no problem'. Other findings also suggest that 'participation' in this sense usually occurs from a position of individual or household self-interest and has little to do with a sense of community which is traditionally weak in Cambodia (Thion, 1993; Ovesen, et. al. 1996). Also, voluntary contributions, compassion, reciprocity are moral ideals and forms of merit-making which are active and draw people together within the religious domain, but are not always amenable to the everyday and secular practice of making a living (Collins, 1999).

Regarding participation by villagers in the phase prior to project implementation, i.e. the planning and decision-making process at village level, VDC members seemed to welcome a shorter and simpler LPP-process, on the basis of their own and other villagers' time constraints. However, the problem was seen to lie rather in representing villagers at the commune level. In particular VDC women complained of little access to and information about the process at CDC-level since, in both villages concerned, the elected woman representative is, as a rule, not called to these meetings '...unless they are about gender'. One of them, in Pursat, pointed out to us that '...even when women are not very active at the meetings, they listen and tell villagers' i.e. they fill an important function in spreading information and facilitating transparency.

A related concern of VDCs irrespective of gender is that they are not sufficiently consulted: 'Now they have spent so much time on training us, why aren't we used to full capacity?' and 'Why can we no longer be able to manage our own projects at village level?', some Pursat VDC members wondered. VDC members in Battambang felt the commune chief, on his visits, should consult with them and not only with the village chief. This resonates with a frequent theme in all three villages studied in the Battambang commune, where the distance between village and commune was greater than in the Pursat case: By-passing the local knowledge of villagers/farmers in infrastructural projects handled by the commune authority had, as reported by farmers, had "disastrous results".

The question for the VDC is how to secure their role as effective representatives of the village with the new commune focus, and keep up the dialogue with villagers about the process. Upholding or improving the link between VDC and CDC is a recurring theme emanating from VDCs and may be vital to sustaining their confidence in commune-level processes. Further, how can the investments made in training so many local people and the potential they represent be harnessed in the future structure? VDC, one of its members claimed, is a pool from which to recruit capable people to commune level. 'How do we know that those elected into commune council will have the capacity and experience of participatory development as VDC people have?'

6.5 Leadership: Villagers Ideals and Expectations

As noted above, the coercive power of commune and village chief, manifested most clearly in the institutions of forced labour and conscriptions in the past, has clearly been curtailed⁹. Thus, villagers might no longer heed the village chiefs commands or even go to meetings. Group leaders, where still relevant, may be appointed by the village chief but if they are unhappy they can quit. As one chief said, '...in the 1980s or early 90s, nobody ever said 'no''. Today, so the stories go, local people can even approach 'top level people' in ways that never happened before. One informant tells us the story of the villager that interrupted the district chief's meeting with an urgent business of his, which the latter then left in order to attend to the villager. The survey also suggests that the new attitudes also includes the commune chief, with the recurring motivation 'people are no longer afraid'. However, in reality, so far, few 'ordinary villagers' would seem willing to approach the commune chief directly.

Still, the stories and views on leadership readily shared by villagers do suggest that some things are changing. The expectations associated with leadership may throw some more light on this:

In all villages studied, people are clearly in favour of electing their village chief. Valued qualities commonly referred to are 'treating villagers well'; 'knowledgeable': 'honest, no corruption'. Other qualities referred to had to do with the paternal role of 'caring', or even 'love', for the villagers. The proper duties of a village chief, villagers report, are 'to govern' (*krup krong*, literary 'supervise') and to 'guide' (*dak nuom*, literary 'accompany along'). These leadership duties then seem to be filled with new contents: He should look out for villagers's needs, support his community, making demands on their behalf when necessary (in times of shortages, for instances) to 'the organisation' or upwards, through the formal political channels. And he should be knowledgeable in how to do this and do it honestly, in a transparent manner.

Villagers were also asked about their ideals for leadership at the commune level. They were asked to give three criteria or valued qualities for a *mee khum*. Their answers can be grouped under four headings:

The first was 'caring', i.e. showing true concern for villagers' problems; tolerance; understanding of villagers' situation; focus on the poorest people. The second set of ideals can be summed up as 'accessibility', referring to having direct contact/closeness; cooperation and dialogue rather than 'strong command', one that doesn't make himself 'big'. If the first refers to the more traditionally paternal ideal, the second seems to refer to a more interactive, less

⁹. In contrast, few days a year of collective work duty, referred to as 'social work', is perceived as reasonable..

hierarchical relation to leadership. Thirdly, '*competence*', refers to someone who does serious work; has good management ability, education and/or experience, and ability to connect villagers' to outside resources. '*Trustworthy*', finally, is then someone with commitment, showing fairness and one that does not engage in corruption.

It is also instructive to look at the criteria for electing VDC-members, as reported from one village: apart from a certain level of 'education' and literacy, 'gentleness' and 'enjoying the love and respect of the villagers' were qualities people cited as important. An old man in another village pointed to the ways in which the Pagoda committee gets people to do things together, in contrast to the traditionally coercive exercise of political power, 'through soft words' and 'polite advice' demonstrating a moral character, as '...nobody will listen more than once to a strong command but be sure to forget quickly'. These ideals of softness, honesty, compassion and quiet wisdom, running contrary to the force and command often associated with secular authority, are drawn from the moral and spiritual realm of Buddhism. It would appear that they can also be seen to be informing ideals of secular leadership, suggesting that as models, at least, secular (state) and religious authority are not – or no longer – as anti-thetical as has been suggested (cf. Collins, *op cit.*)

In contrast, a deputy village chief, commenting on the politics of selecting candidates for the communal election/commune chief, already in motion on the Battambang commune, may represent more of the traditional 'strong man' authoritarian notions of leadership: 'The poor people, the drinkers, cannot be candidates; instead ...the rich, the brave, those with intelligence and strong command – those who, as we say are 'powerful' in ordering or speaking' (*teak mat pray*, literally – those with salty water from mouth).

A preliminary suggestion is that in the changing political context, a new discourse of political leadership with three main inputs seems to be developing in Cambodia. These inputs are, the traditional, 'strong' and hierarchical power of leadership; the moral ideals supported from the religious institutions; and the ideals inherent in the development discourse (rationality combined with democratic, communitarian ideals of sharing power and responsibility). The latter may be seen as playing a pivotal role, changing the relationship and salience of the other two. This is an important issue but one that needs to be more carefully researched. The interesting question, given the role as catalyst, relates to the implications of a future diminished CARERE/Seila, in particular in the new and unchartered territories.

7. Supporting a Commune-level Participatory Development Process

Leadership and legitimacy, the building of competence and trust, constitute core issues for the local population but also for the commune chiefs themselves, in a future reformed commune.

The ideals elicited at local level, where the introduction of new models of leadership and governance can be discerned to interact or even synthesise with indigenous models, forms part of the moral basis of legitimacy. This, of course, as everywhere, presupposes a structural one, i.e. in this case the formal mandate (as elected official), and the financial and human resources with which to fulfil such a function.

When asked to contrast the ideals with the reality of local leadership today, respondents gave a number of shortcomings on all counts, in particular in the conflict-ridden Battambang village. In the case of Pursat and the more favourable view there of the commune leadership,

the village had a comparatively good resource structure, much less conflicts over land, and had participated in a host of development activities for a much longer time. In contrast, a village in a neighbouring commune outside of the Seila framework a high degree of distrust and dissatisfaction with leadership, although the data here needs to be more carefully analysed. Throwing envious looks at the nearby, more fortunate (Seila-) village, these villagers accuse their leaders for having missed the opportunity to be part of Seila and development. Thus, village-level perceptions must be seen in a wider, local context of comparison between villages.

Not surprising, in the Seila villages studied, villagers did connect development work with the commune, primarily through CDC activities; the village with a longer CAREERE/Seila presence could also point to more substantial results than the more recently included village. Both commune chiefs and village chiefs are thus perceived as related to 'development work' today. The latter is the one with the greatest visibility in village and seen as the given channel to commune authority. The presence of Seila and possibly other development organisations, have facilitated the ideational connection between development and the new responsibilities of local authority. Even if the ideals expressed by villagers on local leadership is as yet a far cry from their reality, formulating and giving voice to those ideals is in itself telling and marks an awareness of the possibility of an order different from the top-down political command of the past.

While commune chiefs are generally informed about the elections, and are aware that they will be accompanied by a rather thorough commune reform and a new role for them, they have as yet, understandably, no detailed information about this. However, the support for the reform was clear-cut, when discussed with local intelligentsia, the local political opposition, district or province officials. Villagers including VDC-members, knew little about either commune elections or reform and, lacking any frame of reference with which to understand 'commune councils', few were prepared to comment. What came out clearly, however, was their support for the idea of choosing officials and representatives at commune level, while a few villagers made the qualifying remark, '...only if elections are free and democratic and not manipulated by parties.' They were not sure, as '...top levels are still not democratic'. Reflecting the lack of trust in the commune authority in a conflict-ridden area (Battambang), locals who had worked in or around the commune office suggested keeping commune council separate from the party politics of the commune chief. A local NGO pointed out the need to build in structures ensuring transparency and commitment, as corruption and the lack of incentives for fair procedures is a real problem. With those reservations, it is fair to say that the study generally reflects an eagerness to see the commune election and commune reform happening.

As elected officials, in the future, communal leadership and council members will also have to show some results, in order to create or maintain trust and legitimacy. Although not being very clear about their future role in a reformed commune, commune leaders appeared confident in terms of their own capability in running a more development-oriented commune authority. As statements of motivation and intent, no doubt, they downplayed the problems of matching existing capacity of the commune office with expected achievements. It is obvious that the commune – normally keeping its records in a drawer in an office which is rarely open – lacks a wide range of capacities, including the simpler tasks of administration.

What kinds of support are needed to assist them in fulfilling this role in a participatory manner? Based on the findings of the study, three areas suggest themselves:

Training – providing the necessary competence and motivation for managing participatory development, including all staff at commune level; also including the development of a number administrative systems.

Transparency – To enhance accessibility and accountability, where an effective village link to CDC is vital. Supporting informal channels of communication and dialogue between villagers and commune leadership, to increase the sense of understanding and being part of the development efforts in the village. Particularly budget work needs to be transparent.

Transfer of Resources – The commune must be able to 'deliver the goods' in order to fulfil the requirements of a caring and competent leadership. For this purpose, the communes need adequate financial support.

Summing up, the present situation in a small number of communes and villages suggest that the commune office, with particular reference to the commune chief, has the motivation to assume an expanded mandate of development for the commune. At least in one of the areas studied, he also has a reasonable degree of legitimacy among the local population to do so. In either case, the commune in its envisaged role of managing development needs a wide range of support including a system of monitoring, to build the capacity and increase the legitimacy locally. Key components for participatory development at commune level are village representation in a commune body, such as the CDC, and that work is carried out in a transparent and equitable manner. Thus, the design of the LPP might be less important than ensuring that village representatives are competent and committed and have a fair chance of arguing their case at CDC, at the same time as the role of the CDC vis-a-vis the Commune Council is safeguarded and strengthened. The systematic variations between areas in the study, reflect very different local conditions and thus different challenges that communes are facing with the new reform. It is quite clear that some communes are more prepared for the change than others. The legacy of war, the present political and economic situation, with wide and growing gaps among the local population, reflected in ongoing conflicts and the lack of trust among the population, forms a context which poses serious obstacles to the foreseen changes at commune level. At the same time, it may be argued that the development agenda, properly supported, offers a more positive role and function for the commune leadership. Nevertheless, these kinds of problematic contexts should be identified and given particular attention in any support and monitoring structures that will accompany the commune reform.

8. The Role of the Commune in Participatory Development: Conclusions

The study shows that the varying economic and political conditions in Cambodian communes, and the extent of CARERE/Seila presence, provide very different starting points for the new role of the commune in participatory development. As the example from Pursat shows, given relatively stable conditions over the years, a motivated and concerned commune leader may, in spite of a baggage of coercive power from the past, assume a more positive role associated with progress and development. In contrast, the Battambang case indicates that some areas have a much longer road to travel to remove a deep-seated mistrust of authorities. A commitment to 'development' (with somewhat shifting understandings of the term) is what many villagers would want in local leadership. However, in some areas the idea of a new commune mandate to manage the process is met with considerable scepticism, fearing

nepotism or party loyalty, rather than working in the true favour of villages. Here, CAREERE/Seila is often seen as the safeguarding mechanism of such practices.

The survey data, still to be fully processed, in one commune/village where CAREERE/Seila has not been present, suggest a considerable lack of trust in local authorities. Villagers seem to feel abandoned by incapable and unmotivated leaders, comparing their plight with the more prosperous 'Seila villages'. Clearly, there is a raising awareness in these communes and villages of development elsewhere, which can be assumed to facilitate the future expansion of the model in such areas.

There is no doubt that CAREERE/Seila has been vital in facilitating relations of trust between the local population and the government structure, and also in contributing to infusing old leadership roles at local levels with new 'development' contents.

The concept of 'participation' is difficult. In view of the problems, even with massive resources and a comprehensive LPP (cf. Biddulph, various years), to reach genuine broad-based participation, it will hardly be more thorough when the responsibility for local development moves to the commune level. 'Participation' as guiding light for project quality and development must make a distinction between '*participation*' as *delivery* and '*participation*' as *empowerment* (cf. Kaufman & Alonso 1996). If 'participation' refers not only to the effective planning and implementing of material improvement in the villages, but also comprises a learning process aimed at empowering local people, allowing new models to be absorbed and tested, and adapted to indigenous values and practices, it is difficult to see the success of an experiment with such a brief time span. In a recent study commissioned by the World Bank, the main conclusion is that 'participation' demands time, and that we need to learn to 'go slow' (IDS 1999). In its shortened version, LPP may gain in delivery efficiency, but diminishes participation as a dialogue and a learning process.

A second problematic aspect of 'participation' noted in the literature (eg. Sachs et. al. 1992) is *the danger of turning manipulative*, using the concept to get people involved but not allowing the same people to be a part of either the real decisions (in reality taken out of sight of the villagers), or experiencing the real benefits of those decisions. Neither of these aspects, where the rhetoric of participation conceals actual exclusion, seem to have characterised the CAREERE/Seila practices to date, although the changes outlined are such that the risk for a rhetorical turn increases.

Given that participation in a deeper sense remains crucial to the CAREERE/Seila experiment, thinning out of the model when it is to be introduced in new areas hampers the prospects of the project. Thus, the problem lies with villages with little or no previous exposure to CAREERE/Seila, rather than with those who have a longer learning experience through more extensive participatory procedures to rely on. However, even in those areas, if expected to be maintained by its own momentum, particular attention should be paid to safeguarding and strengthening the existing links between villages, through VDC (or village representatives), and the commune. Not doing so may backfire on the trust already built in VDCs and among villagers.

Viewing governance from the commune level, the functioning of *the CDC seems to be the key in maintaining links to the village*. Our observations indicate that village representatives attend CDC, raise their voices and manage to secure some support for their villages. At one CDC-meeting we observed an open and transparent process based on democratic principles,

led by a constructive and clever commune chief. While this is probably not the pattern throughout, it shows at least that there is a potential for a local democratic management of development at the commune level. The strengthening and support of this potential would appear to be an important role for the future Seila. The positive future scenario also includes an elected and more competent/trained village chief in the future as a given representative at commune level, working with VDC/village representatives and with an input in the CDC. This would further strengthen the link between commune and village, between state authority and civil society.

Thus, the CDC in its present function is crucial. The CDC is not mentioned in the new commune law and perhaps it cannot be taken for granted that there will be a CDC in the future. This could be a killing factor for the good scenario of adapting the CAREERE/Seila 'participatory approach' to the commune reform (and vice versa). *The relationship VDC/village and CDC is, thus, vital, but vulnerable.* The study shows that communication between these entities sometimes suffer inadequate representation, especially failing to call women representatives. With a quota-based one woman-one man representation to CDC in the future, this problem would be clearly reduced. The focus on the commune level might, if no counterweight is added, serve to systematically exclude women from decision-making fora. Another risk, seen from the perspective of villages, is that, in the new commune councils, not all villages are represented. This might marginalise such villages; it is unlikely (at the current level of commune solidarity) that one village chief will argue the case of another village before his own.

Changing models of leadership. The changing context of contemporary Cambodia, with the decline of violence and the most coercive functions of local authorities, opens up for new models of leadership and modes of exercising power. Today, local leaders, particularly the village chiefs, are not able to command the presence or compliance of villagers as in the past. They are rather expected to be more concerned with supporting their communities, as increasingly responsible for 'development', connecting them to outside resources, although trust often remains a problem. New models may be facilitated by a development discourse, and CAREERE/Seila presence, in offering a novel and positive content to roles and functions of leadership.

Some of these ideals have to do with 'proximity' and the value of local knowledge in the management of rural development. Local leaders are potentially accessible and knowledgeable. Even if village chiefs in this study have very low legitimacy as capable and concerned leaders, they are not irrelevant to villagers and there are clearly expressed needs and expectations associated with their leadership. Village chiefs, and very often commune chiefs, are knowledgeable about rice-farming and villagers' problems in a way that more distant authorities are not. This is a strong argument in favour of the commune level as the focus of rural development. However, lack of transparency and checks on nepotism and self-interest are often seen as problematic obstacles legitimacy and trust. Other doubts refer to the skills and capacities for management required of local leaders.

The possibility of electing leaders and representatives, whether village or commune level, has strong support throughout, perceived as a means of having some control over the process (and a seemingly strong element of 'participation' in the eyes of local people). In the future, if both are elected rather than appointed from above, they will have to present some results, to meet expectations in order to stay on the job. However, their legitimacy needs to build on competence as well as transparency. Showing results, in this broader sense, is of course

contingent on considerable capacity-building of these local institutions, an electoral process, and upon the availability of resources.

Greater attention needs to be paid to the position and changing role of the village chief in a reformed commune. Today, at best, the shortcomings of village chiefs may be offset by more competent and committed VDCs. However, in the future village and VDC/village representatives may be elected and be expected to work together to promote village development which is a step in the right direction. To be sure to capitalise on such a democratic move, some investment should be made into raising the capacity of the successful candidates for the new challenge. Thus, elected village chiefs, with greater capacity to manage their duties fairly and effectively, will enhance the capacity and functioning of the commune.

An issue of a more technical nature is the question of the *financing the activities* of the future Commune Councils. Fairly generous support is outlined through a special development fund and through the possible right to collect taxes. The latter is however a contentious issue and the 'typical' outcome (cf. Manor, 1998) would be that the commune level, in the end, does not receive the sufficient means or rights to carry the reform. Needless to say, if not financed adequately, the reform and the systematically applied participatory approach, will fail rapidly.

A basic paradox might be that, on the one hand, the changing role of the commune authorities will not happen over night. In order to be successful, a number of measures and support structures will have to be offered. This support would comprise massive training of commune chiefs, councils and staff; including the slow process of reversing the hierarchical thinking in the state administration; establishing a wide range of administrative, bureaucratic and financial structures; developing culturally acceptable monitoring system, etc. On the other hand, decentralisation is a controversial reform, which faces quite a lot of political resistance and one that is vulnerable to criticism and early failures. In the case that the reform does not show progressive results (or worse, shows a negative development) within a fairly short period of time, it might be in danger. *Time*, in this as in similar decentralisation efforts, is a goods in short supply.

To sum up, the commune offices seem motivated and might be able to respond positively to the demands put on them in terms of assuming the range of new tasks and functions, although they are facing rather different challenges in different areas. Nevertheless, the study confirms that there seems to be a broad-based acceptance and readiness from at all levels of a new role of the commune authorities, although with considerable scepticism as to their integrity and capacity. The emergence of a 'new commune' will, indeed, not happen automatically, and there is a wide range of critical passages and challenges to overcome. Important in the building up of capacity and trust, thus, are mechanisms of monitoring and evaluation, ensuring transparency and accountability.

Decentralisation experience is now being gained throughout the world. 'Do's and don't's' are outlined, and from a range of conditions, reports of different designs, supports and dangers, become available. Some of these lessons are noted in the report, although there is no room to systematically assess this literature here. These experiences should, reasonably, be consulted in order not to make avoidable mistakes. While Cambodia's experience is unique in many ways, one is today struck by the emergence of 'normality' or, rather similarity, with other rural areas in the world; this opens up greater possibilities to learn from experiences in other countries.