



Local Good Governance of Rural Infrastructure Development Planning: Case Studies of Commune Councils in Cambodia

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Abstract The research examines the application of local good governance (LGG) in the implementation of rural infrastructure development planning (RIDP) and analyzes its strengths and limitations. Two communes with longer and shorter working experience in the application of LGG in RIDP, viz. Khnach Romeas (KR) and Prey Khpos (PK) in Battambang province were selected. The study covered six elements of LGG: rule of law, participation, accountability, transparency, responsiveness and effectiveness and efficiency. The research revealed that the commune with relatively longer working experience (KR) had achieved better performance on several key elements of LGG than the one with shorter working experience (PK). Better performance in LGG by KR than PK commune was due to several factors, including better understanding and application of LGG in RIDP, wider learning by doing in RIDP, more effective fundraising for project implementation, stronger commitment among commune councils (CCs), better coaching and mentoring support from district planning facilitators and authorities and more active local participation. CCs and sampled households expressed relatively higher satisfaction levels on rural infrastructure projects as a result of the use of LGG. Therefore, the LGG performance in applying RIDP of the two study communes was significantly determined by several institutional, economic, and social factors.

Keywords decentralization, rural infrastructure, rural development planning process, local good governance, commune councils

INTRODUCTION

The Royal Government of Cambodia's strategic policy framework, outlined in the Rectangular Strategy Phase II, puts deconcentration and decentralization (D&D) policy to achieve good governance (RGC, 2008). D&D policy was formally put into action in February 2002 (Romeo and Spyckerelle, 2003), when commune elections were held, following extensive piloting since 1996 by the donor-funded Seila Program of the Royal Government of Cambodia which aimed to mobilize aid and coordinate D&D reforms and to alleviate poverty in selected northeastern provinces of Cambodia (RGC, 2000) through local governance reform and participatory planning. Five years of Commune Development Planning (CDP) and annual Commune Investment Plan (CIP) manuals were developed and endorsed for CCs in 2001, then revised in 2007 to improve the planning process (MoI and MoP, 2007). The investment grant through a fiscal transfer from the national budget to CCs for CDP implementation gives priority to rural infrastructure. The arguments for this are that rural infrastructure creates favorable opportunities for production, movement of goods, and market access and contributes to poverty reduction (NCSC, 2005).

The enabling environment for local good governance is still weak. An unclear legal framework and fragmented application of local governance contributed to a lack of decision-making at local levels; top officials have tended to exercise their power and control in local planning (ADB, 2000). There is limited participatory local governance, as democratic decision-making is poorly understood and internalized among the various committees of CCs (NCSC, 2005; Pellini and Ayres, 2007). To some extent, CCs still have limited capacity in the application of LGG through existing traditional and hierarchical decision-making structures (NCSC, 2005) that continue to affect the emergence of an effective local development process in developing countries (Hop, 2009). Specifically, there is poor participation in CDP and CIP, and limited engagement with the demands of local people (Vuthyand Craig, 2008). Moreover, local officials who facilitate planning processes lack experience in encouraging local participation in both planning and implementation (Charny, 1999). Accountability of CCs to local people through CDP is still weak and difficult to establish (Rohdewohld and Porter, 2006). The ongoing public administrative reform has not yet built effective systems for transparency and accountability (Sokha, 2005). Therefore, many aspects of LGG are weakly developed or nonexistent: there is low participation, lack of transparency, weak accountability, and low inclusiveness.

The research examines the application of local good governance (LGG) in the local planning and implementation process of rural infrastructure development planning (RIDP), and analyzes its strengths and limitations in order to identify the challenges and prospects for further strengthening LGG of RIDP.

METHODOLOGY

Rural Infrastructure Development Planning (RIDP), which is planned and implemented under the CDP and CIP, was conceptualized in seven key stages: 1) plan formulation; 2) identification/review of needs and problems; 3) selection of the priority project; 4) district integration workshop; 5) approval of the development plan; 6) project implementation; and 7) project monitoring and evaluation. Rural infrastructure projects studied in this research include rural laterite roads, box culverts, and earth roads. Six key elements of LGG assessed in this study are rule of law, participation, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, and effectiveness and efficiency.

The study was based in two purposely selected communes with relatively different working experience in RIDP, located in Battambang province. Khnach Romeas (KR) had longer experience in decentralization, since 1996, and Prey Khpos (KP) became involved in 2002. Primary data were collected by using two sets of standardized questionnaires designed for 60 CCs and committees, and 110 sampled households. Checklists were used for focus group discussion, key informant interviews, observation, and case studies on RIDP commune projects. Secondary data was scrutinized from literature, related laws, policies and development plans, sub-decrees, declarations, manuals, books, journal articles, and papers. Both quantitative and qualitative techniques were applied. A weight average index (WAI) based on Likert's five social-scale interval was applied to assess local perception of achievement and satisfaction of LGG applied in RIDP from CCs and committees, and sampled households.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of application of LGG in RIDP

The application of LGG in RIDP was synthesized in both study communes and a comparison made against each element of LGG (Table 1).

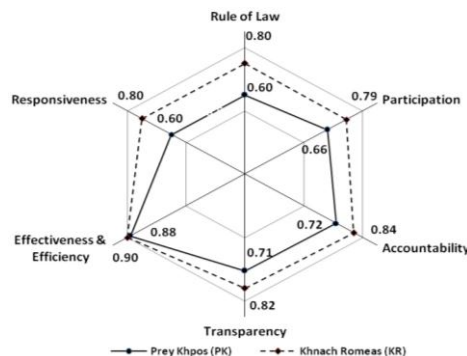
Table 1 Synthesis of LGG applied in RIDP of KR and PK communes

Khnach Romeas (KR)	Prey Khpos (PK)
<i>Rule of Law</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rule of law in terms of guidelines and manual on RIDP and project implementation was well applied by both communes. 	
<i>Participation</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning and Budgeting Committees (PBCs) participated in preparing budget and development framework during the initial stage of RIDP and reviewed local problems and needs. • Villagers, including women and vulnerable groups, actively participated in meetings to identify and prioritize their needs and identify locations for the project site. • NGOs and line departments participated in technical and financial support of proposed projects presented by PBCs, who were also active in exchanging ideas and explaining RIDP to supporters. • PBCs and CCs participated in decision-making to approve RIDP. • Local villagers were involved in the feasibility study. This led to harmonious solutions on the land contribution and impact assessment. Villagers were also involved in project implementation, in site clearance for the convenience of contractors and labor contribution, in addition to their cash contribution (10 percent of the project cost). • Villagers participated in project M&E as well as maintenance and gave comments on projects that were well received by village headmen and on which actions were taken. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PBC members reviewed and prioritized problems and needs. • Villagers, including women and vulnerable groups, participated in meetings to identify and prioritize local problems, needs, and project sites. PBCs were unable to mobilize many of them to join in the activity. People did not speak out and mostly listened to PBCs, who led the decision-making. • NGOs and line departments provided technical and financial support to proposed projects by PBCs, but the PBCs were not so active in exchanging ideas and explaining RIDP to potential supporters. • PBCs and CCs participated in RIDP approval, but not all were present. • Villagers were involved in the feasibility study, yet proper action was not undertaken by CCs in order to solve key issues such as land acquisition for the infrastructure. Limited numbers of villagers participated in site clearance for project implementation, but villagers contributed cash (10 percent of project cost) for project implementation. • Villagers' participation in project M&E was weak, and comments from villagers were not acted upon by CCs and M&E committees. Local participation in project maintenance was not adequate.
<i>Accountability</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PBCs were involved in annual District Integration Workshop (DIW) to select infrastructure projects to be implemented, and to be endorsed by CCs. • The procurement committee took responsibility for preparing bidding documents and handled bidding properly. • The M&E committee mobilized public participation in project monitoring and evaluation, and reported on project progress to all participants at the monthly meetings. • Operation and maintenance groups functioned well. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PBCs were involved in the DIW to finalize projects and get endorsement from CCs, but persons to be in charge of this activity were not designated clearly. • The procurement committee did not prepare and handle the bidding well, due to a lack of clarity and understanding of their roles and responsibilities. • The M&E committee did not adequately mobilize people to participate in project monitoring and evaluation, and did not make proper reports about project progress to the monthly meetings. • Operation and maintenance groups were not well established and lacked clear responsibility.
<i>Transparency</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on the RIDP was disseminated to local people, line agencies, and NGOs. • Bidding was conducted in a public place with participation from all interested stakeholders. The bidding documents were accessible and the contract was awarded based on the given criteria. Villagers were satisfied with the outcome. The result of bidding was announced publicly, and the contract was signed using a standard format. • Reports on RIDP implementation and finances were posted on public information boards. Project information was reported to the monthly meetings. Payment to contractors was based on consensus decision among CCs and the M&E committee. RIDP evaluation was conducted in a timely fashion. Financial auditing was conducted both internally and externally. Project signboards were not erected at the project site, and thus political parties gained 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on the RIDP was disseminated to local people, line agencies, and NGOs. • Bidding was conducted in a public place and with participation from all interested stakeholders. The bidding documents were accessible and the contract was awarded based on the given criteria. Villagers were not satisfied with the contractors due to their unfavorable reputation in the commune. The result of bidding was announced publicly, and the contract was signed using a standard format. • Reports on RIDP implementation and finances were not posted on the public information board. Project information was not disseminated properly at the monthly meetings. Payment to contractors was not based on consensus decision-making among CCs and the M&E committee. Moreover, RIDP evaluation was not

Khnach Romeas (KR)	Prey Khpos (PK)
<p>credit by claiming that they had provided project support.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocation of the commune fund to each village was transparent, as it was given to prioritized projects in poor villages. 	<p>conducted on time and neither was the financial auditing. Project signboards were not erected at the project site, and thus political parties gained credit by claiming that they had provided project support.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocation of the commune fund was not transparent, as it was not given to prioritized projects in poor villages.
<p><i>Responsiveness</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Villagers were satisfied with the project outputs, and CCs were accountable through the establishment of a maintenance committee that ensures the long-term use of project outputs. The identified infrastructure projects solved the problems and needs of all groups of people in the commune. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Villagers were not satisfied with the project outputs, and CCs were considered to be weakly accountable, as no maintenance committee had been established. The identified infrastructure needs were not met and the needs of all groups of people were not addressed.
<p><i>Effectiveness and Efficiency</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project was implemented and finished per the given time line, and the objectives of RIDP have been achieved in general. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project implementation was delayed and therefore the objectives of RIDP were not achieved.

Perception and satisfaction with LGG achievement in RIDP of communes

Based on the WAI values shown in Fig. 1, the perception of CCs' achievement in applying LGG in RIDP in each commune was quite different. Overall, CCs in KR perceived a high level of performance in all six LGG elements: rule of law (0.80), participation (0.79), accountability (0.84), transparency (0.82), effectiveness and efficiency (0.90), and responsiveness (0.80). CCs from PK commune perceived varying degrees of LGG achievement: high levels of effectiveness and efficiency (0.88), participation (0.66), accountability (0.72), and transparency (0.71), and moderate levels of rule of law (0.60) and responsiveness (0.60).



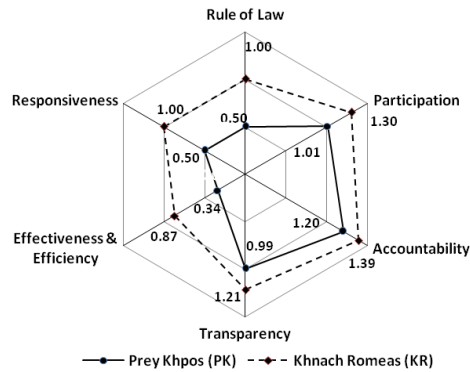
Note: 0.00-0.20: Lowest, 0.21-0.40: Low, 0.41-0.60: Moderate, 0.61-0.80: High, 0.81-1.00: Very High

Fig. 1 Achievement of LGG in RIDP

Figs. 2 and 3 show the different degrees of satisfaction between the CCs and committees and sampled households in both communes. The CCs and committees and sampled households in KR commune are mostly strongly satisfied with the levels of participation, accountability and transparency; they also expressed satisfaction with the rule of law, effectiveness and efficiency, and responsiveness of RIDP implementation. In PK commune, however, CCs and committees are strongly satisfied with only two of the key elements of LGG, participation and accountability, while for the remaining elements they are only satisfied. Interestingly, the sampled households in both communes indicate they are satisfied with all LGG components.

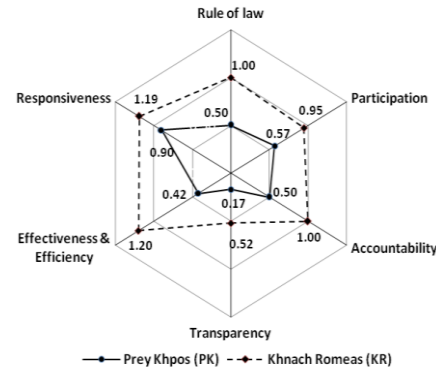
Strengths and limitations of the application of LGG in RIDP

Several key institutional, economic, and social factors contributed to the different perceptions of satisfaction with the implementation of RIDP. The key factors found in this study are contemplated as strengths and limitations in both study communes and can be categorized into institutional, economic, and social dimensions.



Note: -2: Strongly Dissatisfied, -1: Dissatisfied, 0: Neutral, 1: Satisfied, 2: Strongly Satisfied

Fig. 2 Satisfaction of CCs and committees



Note: -2: Strongly Dissatisfied, -1: Dissatisfied, 0: Neutral, 1: Satisfied, 2: Strongly Satisfied

Fig. 3 Satisfaction of sampled households

Some of the important institutional factors that contributed to LGG include the development of rules and regulations, active participation by local people, coaching, mentoring and on-the-job-training, local/international NGO funding support, training in LGG, and exchanging and sharing experience in LGG through exposure visits. Although these factors had a significant influence on both study communes, in KR commune they were more significant. This led to higher levels of achievement of the key elements of LGG in KR commune and they were perceived higher satisfaction from CCs and committees. Economic factors also played an important role in the perceptions of LGG of RIDP. These included clear rules and fair commune fund allocation criteria (allocated funds to all villages and prioritized needs of local people); financial auditing and RIDP evaluation, including but not limited to regular financial auditing from financial officers and external auditors, and evaluators; and ability to raise funds for additional infrastructure project implementation. These factors were better developed in KR than in PK commune. Social factors also affected the results in the two communes and include the degree of public awareness and its spread, particularly among poor and more vulnerable groups; the presence of local leadership able to generate and mobilize funds for RIDP implementation; and the regular monthly meeting of CCs where interested people were invited to participate actively.

Lower levels of achievement in the application of LGG in RIDP were the result of several institutional factors: the low levels of education, multiple responsibilities as a result of lack of human resources, lack of small-scale infrastructure technical knowledge, and incompatibility of roles and responsibilities among CCs who came from different political parties and had weak deliberative processes to enable good decision-making. Moreover, these economic factors in both communes were made worse by postponement of project implementation, inadequate amounts of commune funding, infrequent evaluation of RIDP and financial auditing, and low incentives and motivation to perform the assigned tasks. In addition, a range of other social factors led to low levels of LGG implementation, including dissatisfaction with land compensation, reluctance of local people to participate in planning processes, replacement of PBCs, inadequate levels of participatory decision-making, lack of public information disclosure, and limited participation in bidding processes of CCs. These factors had a significant influence on PK than KR commune.

These factors contributed to the different levels of performance in the application of LGG in RIDP of both study communes.

CONCLUSIONS

KR commune had higher achievement in six major elements of LGG of RIDP than PK commune. It appears that one of the main reasons for this is the longer time and higher levels of support this commune has had for decentralized planning.

The main areas of difference between the two communes are transparency (finance, information dissemination, reporting), accountability (committees in charge of various project activities), and effectiveness and efficiency (delivery of infrastructure projects), which need to be improved by PK commune. KR commune demonstrated a greater understanding of the principles and practice of LGG of RIDP. Its strength of LGG in RIDP came from higher levels of education as well as longer practical experience implementing RIDP and learning by doing, strong commitment of CCs and committees, more capable CCs that performed well in fundraising for project implementation, significantly higher levels of coaching and mentoring from district planning facilitators and authority, and higher levels of local participation. Despite these achievements, both communes face key policy challenges. These include weak incentives to actively encourage local participation and develop good deliberative processes. There is limited enforcement of proper compensation processes in land acquisition for infrastructure, and low continued support for capacity building of the key local government-citizen interface, the CCs. These factors all need to be addressed to help secure future progress of decentralization and local governance in Cambodia.

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