Cultural Challenges to the Decentralization Process in Cambodia

CHAN Rotha
Asia Foundation, Phnom Penh

CHHEANG Vannarith
Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University

Abstract

Decentralization is believed to be one of the tools to empower the local community in development projects aiming at reducing poverty and improving the distribution of socioeconomic benefits in an equal way. However, in the Cambodian context, the introduction and implementation of "Decentralization" is faced with several cultural problems embedded in Cambodian society. These cultural issues include patron-client relationships, power distance, lack of trust between the local residents and local leaders, collectivism, and gender discrimination.

Keywords: Cambodia, decentralization, culture.

Introduction

Decentralization is seen as a tool for socio-economic development in Cambodia. Decentralization is one of the pillars to achieve good governance and development. (Hun Sen 2004: 5). However, decentralization is encountering several constraints in which cultural factor is one of them. This paper discusses the extent to which the social relations embodied in traditional cultural values impact the process of decentralization in Cambodia. The success or failure of development programs, therefore, is connected to their congruence with popular values system, and this underlines the importance of understanding the indigenous cultural values of a country in implementing a new concept aiming to promote a change in behavior. Only then can a particular development strategy which fits the cultural characteristics of each country be developed (Sinha and Kao 1988: 10-14).

This paper seeks to answer the question of how the externally imposed notion of decentralization is negotiated with local cultural and traditional terrains and whether such traditional social relations are wiped out, survive in, co-exist with, impede, or enhance local governance in the decentralization era. Since it is obvious that successful decentralization depends on popular participation, policymakers, development practitioners and other stakeholders need to know how to encourage the people to become actively engaged in the implementation of decentralization.

Decentralization in Cambodia

Decentralization means the transfers of administrative, fiscal and political responsibilities from the governments at a higher level to those at a lower one. In Cambodia, decentralization is generally understood as "devolution," meaning that "powers are given to legal entities in their own right, with their own elected bodies or councils and their own sets of competencies" (Dosch 2007: 140-1). Known also as, "democratic decentralization" or "political decentralization," devolution is the allocation of funds, authority and powers in term of decision-making and sometimes revenue-raising powers from the central government to elected local bodies (Crook and Manor 2001: 1).

Among the sub-national layers (province, district, and commune), the government has decided to implement devolution to the lowest level and simultaneously adopted deconcentration or administrative decentralization at the provincial level. It is too early to speculate about when there will be democratic decentralization at the provincial and district level (Turner, 2002: 355). This simultaneous form of administrative reform refers to the transfer of certain functions and responsibilities from the central government to the province (Cheema and Rondinelli 1983: 13-30). Notwithstanding the process and progress of decentralization it is noted that communes still have limited form of devolution (Smoke 2005: 29).

Cambodia's decentralization was not primarily driven by internal actors. It was international donors who first pushed for decentralization at the commune level (Dosch 2007: 151). The government born after the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979 did not consider decentralization as a priority or even an option for national reconstruction. A very strong centralization was upheld at that time was because "state institutions are still fragile, and elements of the state's weakness are easy to identify." (Turner 2002: 255).

It was not until the late 1990s that a new thinking about decentralization began to penetrate Cambodia. This latest local administrative reform which gave impetus to decentralization took place in 1996 when Seila Program (Social Economic Improvement Local Agency), initiated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), was implemented. International aid agencies perceived that a strong centralized structure caused "rigid organizational structures, inefficiency, leakage of funds, problems of getting money to the right place at the right time, and no mechanisms for popular community representation." (Turner 2002: 356). This program, supported by the UNDP, Department of International Development of the UK (DFID) and the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) was originally intended to run from 1996 to 2005 but later was extended until 2006.

This donor-driven program was first piloted in seven provinces, then expanded into 17 provinces and eventually covered all 24 provinces by April 2003. It provides support in term of finance, administration and human resources for local development at the province and commune level. Set up to strengthen local governance and reduce poverty, Seila yielded a high rate of economic outcome through the promotion of small-scale infrastructure projects and the emergence of local democratic practices (Anderson 2004: 1).

The process of decentralization in Cambodia began to emerge in 2001 when the Law of Commune Administrative Management (hereafter referred to the Commune

Law) and the Commune Election Law were adopted. The Commune Law delineates the structures, functions, and powers of the elected commune councils. The decentralization of responsibilities and resources to elected councilors are also stipulated in the law. The Commune Election Law is about the regulations and process to be observed in conducting the commune elections which are held every 5 years.

Culture and Decentralization

Culture is a broad and confusing term which means almost anything. Different definitions tend to be given to the word culture depending on its context. Defined by Hofstede (1980: 25), culture is "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another." Human groups can include various groups, the smallest group being the family, the largest group being the civilization, the religion or the nation. Bocock asserts that culture refers to different things depending on time. The following is a list of definitions of culture provided by Bocock (Cited in Schech and Haggis 2000: 16):

Culture: cultivating land, crops, animals
Culture: cultivation of mind, arts, civilization
Culture: process of social development
Culture: meanings, values, ways of life
Culture: practices which produce meaning

Since this paper aims to discuss how culture relates to decentralization, culture is thus defined as "sets of commonly agreed and accepted beliefs, practices, behaviors, values and perceptions which have long been embedded in a certain society and in the people of that society."

Culture and power exist in a complex and mutually interacting relationship. Any changes taking place in a society are always affected by cultures and values of that society (White 1987: 212). Any sort of management, either at national, local or organizational level, cannot be isolated from the values and customary practices of the stakeholders within a nation or community or organization respectively.

One commonly held assumption is that indigenous culture needs to evolve when a foreign culture penetrates the society that embodies it, and decentralization, at least in Cambodia, is indeed a product of Western democracy. This cannot be overlooked when considering the new atmosphere of Cambodia. As already noted, decentralization was initiated and implemented as early as 1908 by France during the colonial period (Locard 2002). It had been up and down for decades since then. It was not until 2002 that decentralization was reintroduced and widely disseminated throughout the country against the long-existing centralization culture of management and governance in Cambodia.

Normally, the home culture may absorb or reject the new culture depending on its characteristics and nature. Does Cambodian culture accommodate to, or reject or co-exist with decentralization?

In Cambodia decentralization is expected to enable the local governments to function as a "mirror image of the stereotype of Khmer political culture" (Ojendal and Sedara 2006: 512). Thus, it cannot be implemented successfully if Cambodia's social

relations dominated by the country's long cultural values which are not supportive of popular participation, bottom-up decision making practices and local autonomy (Blunt 2005: 77). It requires citizen's participations in decision making process and it should be embedded into the social relations of that nation's culture.

Social Relations in Cambodian Cultural Context

Patron-Client Relations

Patron-client relations or the patronage system are defined as "a form of hierarchical, social relationships in which no one is considered equal to anyone else. They are all ranked by a combination of variables, including - but not limited to - age, sex, wealth, political position, and religious piety" (Sok Hach 2005: 3).

A patron is a patron because s/he possesses much wealth and strong power from which a client expects to benefit if s/he, as a client, exhibits respect towards and offers certain services to his/her patron. According to Bit, the support of both patrons and clients towards one another are seen by both sides as "inherent obligations" and both parties try to maintain the social order in which the power-based relationship prevails (Bit 1991: 22).

Like other Southeast Asian countries, Cambodia is a society embedded with a very strong patronage system regulating all social and political relationships. A degree of patron-client relations grows more important and more complex (Legerwood and Vijhen 2002: 143). According to Ledgerwood and Vijghen (2002: 113), understanding patron-client relationships in Cambodia provides a useful insight into local level relationships between a community's leader and his/her people in the country. How people in a village reach a decision, how villagers are governed and what can make villagers recognize an individual as a village's leader can be generally answered through the understanding of this patronage model.

Socially and politically Cambodia is replete with very strong patronage networks through which both patrons and clients strive to seek "crucial means of gaining access to resources and increasing one's status," thus characterizing this relationship with "distrusts and suspicions" (Hinton 2004: 122-125). People who are placed in weaker positions are very likely to pay loyalty to those at relatively higher positions in exchange for protection (Chandler 1992: 105). Patrons must constantly watch out for dishonest subordinates; otherwise, the farmer's power may be displaced by that of their followers. Peang-Meth (1996: 448) comments on the firm existing of the Khmer patronage system that:

> In a group, loyalty established between the authority (the god-king or his representatives) and the people whose need for personal security and protection results in their acceptance of the leader's power. Loyal Khmers follow their leaders and die for them so long as the bond between them remains strong…

The current system of patron-client relationships in Cambodia has the following distinct characteristics: firstly, the patron-client relationship is identical to kinship; secondly, the bond between patrons and clients is not fixed but negotiable and flexible; thirdly, the benefits provided by patrons are not equal to the services provided by their clients;

and fourthly, local leadership remains influenced by Buddhist values, albeit to a lesser degree than in the past (Ledgerwood and Vighen 2002: 144).

The establishment of the patron-client system in this predominantly Buddhist society is partly attributive to Buddhist values. Rd and Vijhen 2002: 114). Buddhist doctrine teaches that the rank of each individual in the hierarchy reflects the consequences of personal merits and karmic acts done in the previous life (O'Leary 2006: 22). Power and wealth are indicative of such merit. Leaders who are generally wealthy are perceived to benefit from their merit making in the past life. The poor and the powerless, similarly, are believed to have done less merits and more karmic acts in their past existences and they tend to attributes their suffering and low status to *prumlikhet* (destiny) and *veasna* (fate). To the Khmer people, karma is a determinant of one's status and destiny. According to one Khmer saying "*If you sow good, you'll get good; if you sow evil, you'll get evil*." The bond between a patron and a client becomes one of "moral responsibilities and obligations rather than mere economic exchanges" (Ledgerwood and Vijghen 2002: 115).

Several other Khmer proverbs and sayings reflect and reinforce the influence of patron-client relationships in this society; the underlying meaning of those proverbs and sayings generally implies that inferiors must not go against superiors, and it is the duty for the strong to look after the poor. Those include: *Don't hit a stone with an egg*, meaning that it is pointless for the weak to oppose the strong, *Don't throw the fishing line across the mountain*, meaning that proper behavior towards and complete obedience to superiors are always necessary, *The rich should take care of the poor like the cloth which surrounds you*, and *The wise should watch over the ignorant like the ships do a sampan*.

The impact of patron-client networks on both central and local governance is alarming. Firstly, it gives rise to feelings of fear and possible threats, especially among rural people, who have no political patrons, mainly the ruling Cambodian People Party (CPP) patrons. During the data collection in Cambodia, we happened to talk to several villagers and primary school teachers in Prey Pouch commune about their local leaders. Srourch, a primary school teacher, complained that he had not been invited to a number of village meetings because he was suspected of belonging to another political party, rather than the CPP. "Unlike before, the Commune Chief does not smile at and talk to me when I met him recently on the street," the teacher continued, "I don't know what is going to happen next. I don't know how to tell them that I remain loyal to the CPP... I am scared." Similarly, another teacher, Sitha, a colleague of Srourch, said that, "Nowadays if you do not have a CPP membership card, that means you are excluded from the community and they (the village chief and the commune chief, both from the CPP) will not be helpful to you when you are in trouble." Villagers, however, do not perceive such nepotism or favoritism shown by their community's officials and leaders as unfair or unjust, because they feel that it is normal and necessary for people to belong to the clientele of their leader. The strong preference for hierarchical relations within a group does not enable an individual at a lower level to take any initiatives unless his/her boss gives a clear guideline and approval. Consequently, this system has severe implications for the success of decentralization, as it manifests a general reluctance by people to express their opinions in public meetings or provide any critical comments on the work of their commune leaders (Pellini and Ayres 2005: 11). The 2002 commune elections did not, therefore, mean any relaxation of the center's grip of power over local

authorities. The fundamental nature of "personalized, centralized Cambodian politics" has not changed, and power is still in the hands of leading politicians operating through the patronage network of the ruling party (Un Kheang and Legerwood 2003: 114).

Power Distance

Harmony, which is indispensable for development, occurs when the more powerful treat the less powerful with respect and understanding. However, in Cambodia, social integrity exists when the people conform to and recognize "the status hierarchy" (Blunt 2003: 13). In cultures with an unequal distribution of power, those in inferior positions find it difficult to challenge their superiors because subordinates tend to find it socially unacceptable to show any contempt for the actions and decisions of their leaders. Unfortunately, power inequality or power distance is "inevitable, functional and socially determined," and no society has ever succeeded in eliminating inequality. Yet, the degree of inequality in a "pluralist" society is smaller than "elitist" society (Hofstede 1980: 92-95).

In line with this, the concept of power distance of Hofstede becomes an important cultural dimension that cannot be overlooked when one discusses effective leadership. Influenced by Mulder's Power Distance Theory, Hofstede (1997: 28) defined power distance as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions (the basic elements of society like the family, school, and the community) and organizations (workplaces) within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally."

Many cultural differences can be understood from the study of power distance. Hofstede identifies the prevailing existence of power distance in family, school, workplace, ideas and state. The understanding of and the study of power distance help explain the reasons why a certain society accepts a certain social or economic inequality and why the followers still tolerate the harsh and unjust leadership of their leaders. It also illustrates why a few people are granted the power of life and death over their subjects and why there tends to be no resistance to that. The short answer to these questions, according to Hofstede, is the determination of "national culture" (Hofstede 1980: 90).

A relevant aspect of power distance to be discussed in this context is the one existing in a state. In a state of high power distance, the sources of power of the powerful derive mainly from "family, friends, charisma, and/or the ability to use force" (Hofsted 1997: 38). According to the Power Distance Theory advanced by Mulder, power is a drug and thus possession of power is addictive. Those who are in power always desire for more (cited in Poppe 2002: 178). In high power distance societies, the powerful, who are never blamed and never take blames for any wrong doings, tend to use their position to acquire more wealth. The less powerful within such a society expect and accept unequal distributions of power (Husted 1999: 343).

Cambodia, in which social relationships, like those all across Southeast Asia, are hierarchical, is regarded as a high power distance state. In the family environment, birth order and sex determine the family social rank. The family is the place where children first learn to uphold or reject high power distance. From birth, one can observe that Cambodian children are taught to accept high power distance. They are expected to be obedient to their parents and teachers without any questions.

In a normal social environment, the display of respect towards those of higher status is essential in this society that has been influenced by both Theravada Buddhism

and Brahmanism. While Theravada Buddhism teaches the Cambodians to be "tolerant of others, to be accepting and conciliatory," Brahmanism spreads the "the source of the class consciousness…in social and political life, even in modern times" (Peang-Meth 2003: 72-73). The influence of Buddhism has certainly helped create a high power distance in Cambodia. If rulers abused their power, they were destined to suffer from their karmic actions in the next existence. Those enjoying high status and great power are believed to possess these things because they have earned merits and done good deeds in their past lives. As a consequence, people tend to regard their rulers almost as divine beings whom they have to respect and follow. This may constitute the reason why people quickly put their trust in Lon Nol, despite the fact that he had launched a coup toppling Sihanouk, and why mass of people were easily lured to join Khmer Rouge troops in the countryside.

Traditionally and culturally, then, Cambodia has a strong preference for hierarchical relationships in such institutions as the family, the village, the city, and indeed the entire nation. There are no significant actions undertaken without explicit orders or instruction from the top (Blunt 2003: 12). There is no equality in social relationships. Invariably "age, wealth, political position, religious piety and sex" determine social rankings outside the family (Legerwood 2006).

Even in language, there is a clear dichotomy between the "higher" and the "lower." The Khmer language reveals the social differences between people talking to each other through the use of pronouns, nouns and verbs. There are words for the old, the young, laymen, monks and royal family members. The appropriate word is chosen according to an individual's status, age and sex. For example, the Bang (the elder) is used to address someone who is older in age or more knowledgeable or higher in rank. It is considered inappropriate to address someone in a higher position by his/her name despite a younger age.

A country with high power distance is likely to find it difficult to accept decentralization. This is because "there is a desire for status consistency" and since people tend to wholly agree that an "order of inequality" is important to meet people's desire for "dependency and the sense of security" for both the more and less powerful (Hofstede, 1997: 38). Consequently, in Cambodia, local participation, responsiveness and questioning of the local authorities have yet to be transformed into reality due to the deeply embedded structure of hierarchy which remains "sacrosanct" (Martin 1994: 11).

These values run counter to values of decentralization, which requires Commune Councils (CCs) to exercise their powers and discharge their duties independently, fearless of superiors' criticisms. High power distance is "very unreceptive-especially to bottom-up decision making, but also even to consultation with subordinates. Leaders analyze, decide and inform. They rarely consult and never have decisions made from beneath" (Blunt 2003: 12). Because there are no mechanisms to deal with high power distance, decentralization may prove impossible in Cambodia. The power will remain concentrated in the hands of a small group of people, not only at the local level but also at the central level.

Social Capital (trust) vs. Mistrust

As mentioned earlier, successful decentralization requires the participation of all stakeholders, especially the villagers. Popular participation will arise only when villagers in the communities put trust in their local leaders and believe that they themselves will

benefit from such participation under the leadership of their elected leaders. In this context, a comprehensive analysis of social capital and trust in Cambodia is necessary in order for the nature of popular participation in local governance to be clearly understood and to see how social capital can be utilized to strengthen the links between villagers and CCs and to improve villagers' participation in local governance.

Coleman defines social capital as a complex of obligations, expectations, norms, and trust embedded in the relations between members of a community (Coleman 1988: 94). Social capital requires a set of conditions or a particular thinking pattern in order to generate its specific capability. Social capital consists of such aspects of social organization as "networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam 1995: 67). In a very simple but precise way, Woolcock and Narayan (2000: 226) define it as "the norms and networks that enable people to act collectively." Trust, which is "the essential glue for society," is a very important part of all forms of social capital (Uphoff 2000: 227).

From an institutional point of view, social capital is mainly the product of a particular legal, political and institutional environment (Woolcock and Narayan 2000: 234). A country with strong social capital fosters public trust in national institutions because there have so far has functioned correctly. People act more collaboratively and begin to see each other and their leaders more trustworthy when the (formal) institutions have gained trust from the public and built up credibility through effective and fair functioning (North 1990: 6), in other words, when justice is generally perceived to be prevailing and legal and judicial systems regulate and punish wrong doing. Thus, social capital can be utilized to either enhance or undermine "the public good".

There is little doubt that social capital in Cambodia was severely eroded and then almost obliterated during the past internecine conflicts which brought only hardship, division, hunger and misery for the Cambodian. The most terrible time in Cambodian history was the Khmer Rouge Regime from 1975 to early 1979. This regime made a clear distinction between "old" people or rural peasants, and "new" people, those associated with the former political and economic elites, the intellectuals, or more often than not those who could simply read. The Khmer Rouge Regime virtually wiped out traditional Cambodian culture, norms, religion, organization, and networks. The informal forms of social capital, including community and family networks, were destroyed. Fragmentation, mistrust and the dissolution of the primary bonds of kinship were inevitable outcome of the regime's policy making villagers suspicious of and pitted against each other. Everyone was forced to spy on everyone else, even members of the same family. Trust was eradicated and the seeds of deeply rooted fear were planted (Colletta and Cullen 2000: 26). The harsh leadership and extreme policies of the Khmer Rouge Regime transformed and depleted all remaining forms of social capital through the complete secrecy of the central leadership which made the whole population believe that danger was "everywhere, nameless, faceless and ever-present" (Bit 1991: 82).

Traditional forms of social capital gradually reemerged after the collapse of the Khmer Rouge, which was followed by the Vietnamese-influenced governments led by Heng Samrin (1979-1991) and Hun Sen (1991-1993). Democracy came to replace communism after 1993. However, three successive democratic governments have not been able to meet the Cambodian people's expectations. These governments have been notorious for corruption, lack judicial independence, absence of rule of law and extreme poverty (Gottesman 2003: 355-356). Sense of mistrust of one another and government's

institutions is rife.

The institutional social capital in Cambodia must also take into account the complex structure of patron-client system and high power distance between inferiors and superiors. Patron-client relations can constitute a form of social capital as they represent reciprocal assistance and obligations between patrons and clients. However, as discussed above, in Cambodia, this relationship benefits patrons (the powerful and the rich) much more than clients (the poor). Under such a system, social capital simply generates more negative effects on society, as inferiors lose trusts in superiors.

The consequence is that trust in leadership diminishes. The sense of distrust worsens as power distance keeps increasing. Both the patronage system and the high power distance are influenced by the marked preference for hierarchical relations in this society. According to a survey conducted by the Centre for Advanced Studies in 2005, although public trust in commune councils was higher than in the higher tiers of governments, the degree was low (Kim and Henke 2005: 18).

Collectivism vs. Individualism

In collectivist societies, individuals are required by the "norms and duties" of such societies to give priority to interests of families, co-workers or nations over their own. Hofstede (1980: 51) holds that an individual living in a collectivist environment is expected to show "unquestioning loyalty" to his/her own group, which offers him or her life-long protection and dependence. Moreover, collectivism can be identified either when the interest of one's own extended family or kin is placed over that of an organization or when collective and individual goals are compatible (Triandis 1995: 43).

In contrast, in individualistic societies, personal interests take precedence over those of others. In an individualistic society, the importance of the interests of an individual and his/her own family outweighs that of collective interests, and tightness in individual relationships is absent (Hofstede 1980: 51). Beteille states that individualism promotes competition and capitalism, which eventually results in democracy (Cited in Kim 1994: 23).

In Cambodia, a predominantly peasant country, villagers put a high value on the collective bond of relationships in everyday life. Local people traditionally possess "a sense of collectivism" and the group works for a collective good of their village (Kea 2005). The sense of collectivism has existed since ancient times and it continues to exist today. Three social bonds, family, religion and recognition of the same authority have held Cambodian rural society together since the emergence of proto-state 19 centuries ago (Prum Virak 2005). Ledgerwood and Vijghen (2002: 128) argue "the idea that the group is the focal point for Khmer ways of protecting one's interests seems very valid in the rural Khmer context." Generally speaking, there is an expectation that one should protect the interests of his/her family or group. A Khmer proverb that "Don't throw away the meat and keep the bone" best describes the strong kinships in Khmer society. "Meat" refers to a family member or a friend while "bone" implies those who do not belong to a family or group.

The danger in such a high collectivist society is that the idea of prioritizing "common good" is mainly limited to family members and relatives. Therefore, in this situation "particularistic behavior" is socially acceptable and bearable in collectivist societies while it is not in individualistic ones (Department of Local Administration-Commune Council Development Project 2003: 12).

For Cambodian villagers, it is fair when one who does not belong to a group to not get help although he or she might be in greater need of such help. "The idea of putting one's group before the individual who is in need may be part of a Khmer or even Asian value system." Helping one's group is a duty; otherwise, it is perceived as "neglecting the interest of one's kind," which is regarded as immoral. Thus, to be fair is the "antithesis of individualism" (Lederwood and Vijghen 2002: 128).

The core principle of decentralization require that everyone participate in decision making and express their thoughts about their leaders' activities. However, this actually happens largely in individualistic societies, in which self-assertion is the counterpart characteristic of individual consciousness. Hofstede (1997: 62) contends that in collectivist societies it is important to maintain conformity and save "face." In order to prevent face from being lost and to preserve social harmony, an individual will not display discontent about another's behavior and actions in public.

As in other Asian countries, in Cambodia "saving face" is an important element of social discourse. Open criticism is considered socially unacceptable (Bit 1991: 102). "Face" is lost when someone is insulted or even constructively criticized in public. Ponchaud rightly observes that:

> ...the rule of conduct in society will be "do not behave differently from others" (*khos pi ke*), do not push yourself forward, do not take the initiative, for fear of finding yourself alone, of disgracing yourself in front of others, being derided for possible failure, judged. Thus, the individual becomes isolated in his private thoughts. Decisions are taken by consensus or in accordance with the views of anyone who has dared to expose his views in public, of anyone who is a good speaker (Ponchaud 2007).

In this sense, such democratic principles as participation, initiative and public discussion are discouraged. *Never be first and Look what is behind you and in front of you (Moeul Mok Moeul Kroeuy*) are the principles to save one's face in Khmer society. Watch and evaluate others' opinions before expressing a personal view; otherwise, it is You or the other who will lose face, neither way is socially acceptable.

Feminism vs. Masculinity

The impact of social hierarchy, high power distance and the strong patronage system discussed above is compounded by gender differences. Cambodia is not a feminist society. It tends to be male dominated. Gender is one of the factors that identifies the social ranks in Cambodian society (Ledgerwood 2006). The issue of feminism is important to the development of decentralization because the inclusion of disadvantaged groups, including women and the poor, in all the activities for local development is essential to good governance (Mansfield 2004: 32).

Therefore, it is necessary to examine in the status of Khmer social and political culture to determine whether it poses an obstacle to decentralization. Equally, a clear understanding of the nature of this dimension of national culture can help explain whether decentralization will open up a space for or weaken male capture of power at the expense of women in this country. Besides, it is essential that every project in social engineering including decentralization to recognize the gender inequalities in Cambodia

social and political culture.

Theoretically, decentralization can ensure that both men and women are equally empowered to gain from and contribute to decentralization implementation process and address women's poverty and human rights. The United Nations Development Fund for Women puts forward the following reasons why decentralization provides an open door for women to improve their status:

- Moving the decision-making process closer to the population and communities should facilitate increased popular participation in decision making, including women's involvement.
- Due to their proximity to communities, representatives (and in particular women representatives) at the local level are closer to the issues that poor women face and thus in a better position to immediately identify and address them.
- Women may find it easier to enter into new democratic systems of governance in which men may not yet be entrenched.
- The level of experience and qualifications for entry into local positions is lower than national positions, thus women are less disadvantaged in competition with men (UNIFEM 2004).

Traditionally, Khmer society commonly sees women inferior to men. Certainly, the role of women has dramatically changed in contemporary Cambodia, and women are now allowed to earn money outside their homes by either engaging in business or working in factories or public institutions.

The word gender itself was hardly known to the Cambodian until 1997 when the efforts to promote gender equity in decentralization through Gender Mainstreaming Approach and Women's Specific Approach first carried out in the context of CARERE II program, a UNDP project focusing on rehabilitation and regeneration, the alleviation of poverty and the spread of peace (Brereton 2005: 10). Kate Frieson argues that Cambodian women generally exist in the "shadow," being passive in politics and "submissive to male hierarchy" (Frieson 2001: 3). Living in a society whose traditional social and economic mores place women in a lower position relative to men, Cambodian women, especially those in rural areas, consider themselves as inferior to men and find it difficult to engage in development activities (Brereton 2005: 13). Gender hierarchy is a determinant of Khmer identity.

In Cambodian Buddhism, the religion that more than 90% respect and that is regarded as being deeply connected to Khmer identity (Morris 2000), women occupy a lower position on the religious domain than men do. Buddha taught that everyone must save and could save themselves by their own efforts through merit making. The concept of merit making is that greater freedom from suffering in this life and in the future existence can be gained by good conduct and avoidance of sinful acts in this life. The merits and sins that one accrues in the present life determine whether s/he will be born as a human being of lower or higher position, or as an animal, or as a *Devada* in the heaven or as a person suffering in hell. One of the various ways of merit making is becoming a monk, the supreme way of earning a merit (Ebihara 1968: 385). However, only a man can become a monk and a woman needs to try to earn merits in this life so that she can be born male in a future life. Thus, the Cambodian women are placed in the disadvantageous position not only in merit earning but also in the religious hierarchy (O'Leary 2006: 20).

A Khmer proverb "*Men are gold and women are cloth,*" illustrates the dichotomy in attitudes towards men and women. In this proverb, gold can be cleaned and retain its original value despite being stained with mud while cloth, which is already less valuable than gold, loses its value once muddied or torn. The proverb also implies that a woman is required to avoid bringing shame to her family by keeping herself pure and virgin before marriage and to act in accordance with the traditional moral codes of behavior (*Chhbab Srey*- Rules of the women). In this code, a virtuous woman fulfills such tasks as serving and respecting their husbands, honoring their parents, taking care of their children, and being modest in speech and appearance (Ing 2005: 5-6). A female political activist of the Cambodian Political Party (CPP) pointed out that:

> The customs and traditions of this nation oppresses women. As I said, girls are not allowed to go to school; they are taught from a young age that they should not venture far from home and that they should stay at home with her mother, in the kitchen, and helping to look after children. So the culture does not help women have the confidence to go into politics (McGrew et al2004: 26).

It is socially unacceptable for a Cambodian woman to marry a man who has a lower level of education than her. This is a discouragement for Cambodian women to aspire to higher levels of education as they are afraid of being called a spinster, which sounds socially offensive in Cambodian society.

In a family, it is acceptable if a wife engages in business to support the family while her husband is allowed to keep a high status position in the government despite a very low salary. However, the reverse would be socially unacceptable. In the past, it was extremely common for adult Khmer women not to be allowed to go to school, because it was feared they would write love letters to their boyfriends if they became literate.

In Asia, Cambodia is ranked lowest on "Gender Empowerment Measure," (UNIFEM 2004: 11) illustrating low representation and participation of women in decision making. In the first mandate of the CCs, only 951 or 8% of the total number of councilors were female councilors. Approximately, 2/3 of all councils have no women councilors, and only 34 women occupied the seats of 1621 commune council chiefs. At the highest level, for the third legislature 2003-2008, the National Assembly has only 23 female members out of the total 123 parliamentarians, a very slight increase in figure from 15 women out of the total 122 parliamentarians in the second legislature 1998-2003, and from seven out of 120 in the first legislature 1993-2003. The representation remains minimal, though. This results from the general trend that women tend to be placed lower down in the party lists of candidates running for the commune elections, making women's voice to remain poorly represented in decision-making. Having worked for a CC for a few years, a woman councilor complained that:

> I always try to raise my opinion during the meetings, but it seems as if I am just a minority. Other male CCs still think that women are not capable, and women are not given full priority yet. For every ten words I say, they listen to only three... I am just a paper figure. Because they put me down, they never let me know about the details of the projects (Ojendal and Kim 2006:524).

The deep-seated cultural bias was also emphasized by councilors in the 2004 report by Brereton evaluating gender-mainstreaming strategy of *Seila* program. Both men and women councilors reiterated, "Women have less capacity than their male counterparts and/or they are shy, less experienced and lack confidence" (Brereton 2005: 42). The social attitudes of Cambodia discourage women from not only going to higher education but also from taking decision-making positions. There are already cases of female CCs who resigned from the office because their husbands were not supportive (UNIFEM 2004: 23). Normally, elected women councilors have very few opportunities to receive capacity building and other trainings programs provided by related agencies and non-governmental organizations as most training programs focus on such positions women tend not to occupy as commune administrators (Commune Chief first and second Deputy Chiefs).

Khmer tradition, which discourages and undervalues the education of girls compared to that of boys, is also a handicap to attracting a representative spectrum of female potential commune election candidates. A large number of women were excluded from involvement in the elections because the commune election law requires all CCs be able to read and write.

In addition to the cultural discrimination against women, it is also observed that the current institutions somehow create an added disincentive for women to engage in governmental and decision making positions. Under the Council of Administrative Reform (CAR) regulations, a "dependency allowance" is given to only male civil servants if their wives are at home, while benefits are not provided for female civil servants. The assumption seems to be that women would never occupy higher positions relative to those held by their husbands.

The immediate solution is commitment of all political parties to increase the number of women candidates and to place them higher up in the party lists in the 2007 commune elections; otherwise, women will remain in the disadvantageous positions among the CCs in a culture in which men are treated superiorly. Another effective solution is the introduction of a quota system for women so that their participation and representation in decision-making can be increased.

There is also a need for the government to realize the relevant policies and strategies that aim to uphold the status of women. For example, there is a need to actualize Article 19 of the Sub-Decree on Decentralization of Powers, Roles and Duties to CS Councils, requiring every council to appoint a woman councilor to be in charge of women and children's affairs. If there is no elected female councilor, the council, with the consultation with the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Ministry of Interior's Department of Local Administration (DoLA), should appoint a non-voting woman to undertake this task.

Conclusion

This paper has presented the decentralization issue in Cambodia and explored major aspects of Cambodian cultural values that are believed to be challenges for implementing the concepts of decentralization mainly imposed by the international donor and financial agencies. The paper argues that decentralization and local governance are difficult to achieve in the society characterized by high power distance, a strong patron-client relationship, a male-dominant environment and low public trust in the political system.

It is a dilemma for policy makers and practitioners to improve decentralization and local governance in Cambodia because they need to make changes while at the same time they need to find the best way to maintain Cambodian cultural values so that the Khmer identity is not lost. The message for policymakers and practitioners is that there is a need to establish an enabling framework provided by decentralization to restore public trust in both local and central leadership and to push for more cooperation between the leaders and villagers while reciprocal benefits are respected. Furthermore, it is crucial to seek an appropriate way to put into practice such democratic concepts as (gender) equality, equal treatment between the powerful and the poor, and openness.

References

Anderson, Henny. 2004. *Cambodia's Seila Program: A Decentralized Approach to Rural Development and Poverty Reduction.* Washington D.C.: The World Bank.

Bit, Seanglim.1991. *The Warrior Heritage: A Psychological Perspective of Cambodian Trauma*, California: Seanglim Bit.

Blunt, Peter. 2003. *The Strategic Management of Capacity Building for Decentralisation and Deconcentration in the Kingdom of Cambodia: Contextual Analyses, Vol.1*. Commune Council Development Project, Phnom Penh.

Blunt, Peter and Turner, Mark. 2005. "Decentralization, democracy and development in a post-conflict society: Commune council in Cambodia." *Public Administration Development*, 25(1): 75-87.

Brereton, Helen. 2005. *Evaluation of the Seila Gender Mainstreaming Strategy 2001-2005 and Recommendation for the Next Phase of Decentralization and Deconcentration Reform*. Partnership for Local Governance, Phnom Penh.

Chandler, David P.1992. *A History of Cambodia* (2nd edn). Boulder: Westview Press.

Cheema, G. Shabbir and Rondinelli, Dennis A., eds. 1983. *Decentralization and Development: Policy Implementation in Developing Countries*. Beverley Hills, CA: Sage.

Coleman, James S. 1988. "Social capital in the creation of human capital." *American Journal of Sociology*, 94: 95-120.

Colletta, Nat J. and Cullen, Michelle L. 2000. *Violent Conflict and the Transformation of Social Capital: Lessons from Cambodia, Rwanda, Guatemala and Somalia*. Washington D.C.: The World Bank.

Crook, Richard and Manor, James. 2000. "Democratic decentralization." OED Working Paper Series 11, Washington D.C.: The World Bank.

Department of Local Administration and Commune Council Development Project. 2003. "The strategic management of capacity building for decentralization and deconcentration in the Kingdom of Cambodia." Occasional Papers on Decentralisation and Deconcentration, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Dosch, Jörn. 2007. *The Changing Dynamics of Southeast Asian Politics*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.

Ebihara, May Mayko.1968. "Svay: A Khmer village in Cambodia." Unpublished PhD Thesis, Columbia University, New York.

Frieson, Kate. 2001. *In the Shadows: Women, Power and Politics in Cambodia*. Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives: Victoria.

Gottesman, Evan R. 2003. *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge: Inside the Politics of Nation Building*. London: Yale University Press.
Hinton, Alexander Laban. 2004. *Why Did they Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Hofsted, Geert. 1980. *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*. Beverly Hills: Sage.
Hofsted, Geert. 1997. *Culture and Organization: Software of the Mind*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
Hun Sen. 2004. *The Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency in Cambodia*. The Office of the Council of Ministers, Phnom Penh.
Husted, Bryan W. 1999. "Wealth, culture, and corruption." *Journal of International Business Studies*, 30 (2): 339-359.
Ing, Kantha Phavi. 2005. *Violence against Women: A Baseline Survey*. Ministry of Women's Affairs, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
Kea, Kiri Renol. 2005. "A perspective from the village in Cambodia: Toward democratization from Below." Paper presented at Forum of International Development Studies, Nagoya University, Japan, November 28, 2005.
Kim, Ninh and Henke, Rodger. 2005. *Commune Councils in Cambodia: a National Survey of their Functions and Performance with Special Focus on Conflict Resolution*. The Asia Foundation, Phnom Penh.
Kim, Uichol. 1994. *Individualism and Collectivism: Theory, Method, and Applications*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
Ledgerwood, Judy and Vijghen, John. 2002. "Decision making in Khmer village." Pp.109-150 in Judy Ledgerwood ed. *Cambodia Emerges from the Past: Eight Essays*. Dekalb: Southeast Asia Publications, Northern Illinois University.
Lederwood, Judy, "Understanding Cambodia: Social hierarchy, patron-client relationships and power." Northern Illinois University. <http://www.seasite.niu.edu/khmer/Ledgerwood/patrons.htm>.
Locard, Henri L. 2002. "A brief overview of the history of commune election: From mission civilisatrice to mission démocratisatrice." Phnom Penh Post, Feb 1-14, 2002.
Mansfield, Cristina and MacLeod, Kurt. 2004. "Commune councils & civil society: Promoting decentralization through partnership." Working Group for Partnerships in Decentralization, Phnom Penh.
Martin, Marie Alexandrine. 1994. *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
McGrew, Laura. 2004. *Good Governance from the Ground Up: Women's Roles in Post-Conflict Cambodia*. Women Waging Peace Policy Commission, Phnom Penh.
Morris, Catherine. 2000. "Peacebuilding in Cambodia: The role of religion," <http://www.peacemakers.ca/research/Cambodia/ReligionandPeacebuildingReportJan2001PT.html>.
North, Douglass C. 1990. *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
Ojendal, Joakim and Kim, Sedara. 2006. "Korob, Kaud Klach." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 37(3): 507-526.
O'Leary, Moira Patricia. 2006. "The Influence of Values on Development Practice: A study of Cambodian development practitioners in non-governmental organizations in Cambodia." Unpublished PhD Thesis, La Trobe University, Victoria.

Peang-Meth, Abdulgaffar. 1991. “Understanding the Khmer: Sociological-cultural observations.” *Asian Survey*, 31(5): 442-455.
Poppe, Matthijs. 2002. “Preferences for changing power positions and power distances: A social value orientations approach.” *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 33 (2): 177-194.
Ponchaud, François. “Approaches to the Khmer mentality,” Catholic Church Cambodia. <http://www.catholiccambodia.org/en/country/mentality.php>.
Prum, Virak. 2005. “Reforming Cambodian local administration: Is institutional history unreceptive for decentralization?” Paper presented at Forum of International Development Studies, Nagoya University, Japan, September 30, 2005.
Putnam. 1995. “Bowling alone: America’s declining social capital.” *Journal of Democracy*, 6 (1): 65-78.
Schech, Susanne and Haggis, Jane. 2000. *Culture and Development: A Critical Introduction*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers.
Sinha, Durganand and Kao, Henry S. R. 1988. “Introduction: Values-development congruence.” Pp.10-27 in Durganand Sinha and Henry S. R. Kao eds. *Social Values and Development: Asian Perspectives*. New Delhi: Sage.
Smoke, Paul. 2005. “The Rules of the intergovernmental games in East Asia: Decentralization framework and processes,” Pp.25-52 in World Bank ed. *East Asia Decentralizes: Making Local Government Work*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank.
Sok, Hach. 2005. “The Political economy of development in Cambodia: How to unite the Gordian Knot of poverty.” *Economic Review,* 2 (4) (Oct-Dec).
Triandis, Harry C. 1995. *Individualism & Collectivism*. Boulder: Westview Press.
Turner, Mark. 2002. “Whatever happened to deconcentration? Recent initiatives in Cambodia.” *Public Administration and Development*, 22 (4): 353-364.
Un, Kheang & Ledgerwood, Judy. 2003. “Cambodia in 2002: Decentralization and Its Effects on Party Politics,” Asian Survey, 43 (1): 113-119.
Uphoff, Norman. 2000. “Understanding social capital: Learning from the analysis and experience of participation.” Pp.215-253 in Ismail Serageldin and Partha Dasupta eds. *Social Capital: A Multifaceted Perspective*. Washington D.C: The World Bank.
UNIFEM, World Bank, ADB, UNDP and DFID/UK. 2004. “A Fair Share for Women: Cambodia Gender Assessment.” Phnom Penh.
White, Ronald V. 1987. “Managing innovation.” ELT Journal, 41 (3): 211-218.
Woolcock, Michael and Narayan, Deepa. 2000. “Social capital: Implications for development theory, research, and policy.” *The World Bank Research Observer*, 15 (2), August.