



# THE EVOLVING MEANING OF SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN CAMBODIA



**Affiliated Network for Social Accountability**  
in East Asia and the Pacific

...connecting citizens to improve governance



# The Evolving Meaning of Social Accountability in Cambodia

---



© 2010 by the Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in East Asia and the Pacific (ANSA-EAP). This is a release edition, published January 2010.

*The Evolving Meaning of Social Accountability in Cambodia* is published and owned by ANSA-EAP. This material may be copied and used for research, educational, scholarly or non-profit purposes without ANSA-EAP's permission. We request that ANSA-EAP be cited as the source of the information and that any photo credits or bylines be similarly credited to the photographer or author or ANSA-EAP, as appropriate. If a copyright is indicated on a photo, graphic, or any other material, permission to copy and use these materials must be obtained from the original source.

Material in this publication is subject to revision. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the viewpoint of ANSA-EAP, its donors, and its associated institutions.

The Ateneo School of Government, a unit of the Ateneo de Manila University (Philippines), operationalizes and oversees the development of ANSA-EAP, with support from The World Bank's Development Grant Facility. ANSA-EAP is an independent project of the Ateneo School of Government under the Ateneo de Manila University, which is the executing agency of the project. As a project of the Ateneo, it falls under the legal governance of the Ateneo Board of Trustees and President.

For more information, please contact:

ANSA-EAP Operations Team  
Ateneo School of Government, Pacifico Ortiz Hall, Fr. Arrupe Road, Ateneo de Manila University, Loyola Heights, Quezon City 1108, Republic of the Philippines.  
Telephones: +6 32 426-6062 and +6 32 426-6002 ext 4627. Fax: +6 32 920-2920.  
E-mail: [info@ansa-eap.net](mailto:info@ansa-eap.net). Website: [www.ansa-eap.net](http://www.ansa-eap.net).

# Table of Contents

<b>Acronyms .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Glossary of Khmer Terms .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>PREFACE .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Working Definitions of Social Accountability.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Research Objectives .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Methodology.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Historical Context .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Political Culture .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Political Institutions and Elections .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Citizen-State Relations .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Nature of Civil Society in Cambodia.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Social Accountability Studies in Contemporary Cambodia .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Khmer Vocabulary of Accountability .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Stakeholders' Views on Social Accountability .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Some Social Accountability Practices and Tools.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b><i>ANNEX. Thoughts on 'Public Service Accountability'. Highlights of Focus Group Discussions with Government and Citizen Groups in Cambodia .....</i></b>	<b><i>42</i></b>



## ACRONYMS

<b>ADB</b>	<b>Asian Development Bank</b>
<b>ADI</b>	<b>Analyzing Development Issues Project</b>
<b>BFD</b>	<b>Buddhism for Development</b>
<b>CAS</b>	<b>Center for Advanced Study</b>
<b>CBO</b>	<b>Community Based Organization</b>
<b>CC</b>	<b>Commune Council</b>
<b>CCC</b>	<b>Cooperation Committee for Cambodia</b>
<b>CCSP</b>	<b>Commune Council Support Project</b>
<b>CDRI</b>	<b>Cambodia Development Resource Institute</b>
<b>CEDAC</b>	<b>Cambodian Center for Study and Development in Agriculture</b>
<b>CMC</b>	<b>Community Management Course</b>
<b>CNGO</b>	<b>Cambodian Non-Governmental Organization</b>
<b>COMFREL</b>	<b>Committee for Free and Fair Election in Cambodia</b>
<b>CPP</b>	<b>Cambodian People's Party</b>
<b>CRR</b>	<b>Citizen Rating Report</b>
<b>CS</b>	<b>Civil Society</b>
<b>CSO</b>	<b>Civil Society Organization</b>
<b>D&amp;D</b>	<b>Decentralization and Deconcentration</b>
<b>HE</b>	<b>His Excellency</b>
<b>IFC</b>	<b>International Finance Corporation</b>
<b>JICA</b>	<b>Japanese International Cooperation Agency</b>
<b>KID</b>	<b>Khmer Institute of Democracy</b>
<b>LNGO</b>	<b>Local Non-Government Organization</b>
<b>MoI</b>	<b>Ministry of Interior</b>
<b>NCDD</b>	<b>National Committee for Decentralization and Deconcentration</b>
<b>OL</b>	<b>Organic Law</b>
<b>PDV</b>	<b>Peace Development Volunteers</b>
<b>RFA</b>	<b>Radio Free Asia</b>
<b>RGC</b>	<b>RGC Royal Government of Cambodia</b>
<b>SAC</b>	<b>Social Accountability</b>
<b>SME</b>	<b>Small and Medium Enterprises</b>
<b>TAF</b>	<b>The Asia Foundation</b>
<b>VOA</b>	<b>Voice of America</b>
<b>WB</b>	<b>World Bank</b>

## Glossary of Khmer Terms

### ***Ak Phibalkech Laar***

Good Governance; refers to an ideal type of leadership or benevolent leadership characterized by transparency, responsibility, and absence of corruption. This is a relatively new term that was used in the 1990s. It also refers the functional, responsive, and accountable administration of the state.

### ***Bandaine***

Networking; refers to a system of interactions and relationships between groups and individuals. It can be referred to individual networks or relationship. Networking happens through kinship and personal group interactions.

### ***Ka Tortuol Khos Trov***

Responsibility; normally refers to individuals being responsible for their own conduct or assigned tasks.

### ***Ka Tortuol Khos Trov Prorkorb doy Thor***

Moral Responsibility; refers to leaders who are concerned with the welfare of the public and treats it with tolerance and fairness.

### ***Ka Tuk Chet/Smarmos Trang***

Trust/Honest; refers to a person who neither cheats nor lies, and acts with honor and respect. This is related to the moral responsibility of individuals.

### ***Kanak Neiyak Pheap***

Accountability; widely understood as responsibility or being able to explain.

***Kanak Neiyak Pheap Sangkum***

Social Accountability; refers to the moral responsibility of leaders to be transparent and responsive to the needs of the people.

***Kar Tor Sou Mate***

Advocacy and expressing or voicing ideas; literally means “to struggle for an idea”. This is a new term that is not widely understood outside the NGO community.

***Komlaing***

Force or strength or power.

***Ksea Knaorng***

Patronage system; refers to the network of relationships between patron and client to promote personal interests. It refers to networking as well.

***Leader***

refers to a simple leader or a person who takes the lead for a particular task or duty.

***Sangkhum***

Social or society



# Preface

**W**hat is the nature of social accountability (SAc) in Cambodia?

This study has sought to answer this question through different means: (1) reviewing related literature that sheds light on Cambodia's historical context, political culture and institutions, citizen-state relations, and the nature civil society in the country; (2) exploring Khmer vocabulary on social accountability; and (3) interviewing key informants from civil society organizations, the government, and the private sector in Phnom Penh, Kompong Speu, Siem Reap, and Battambang provinces.

From the review of available literature and interviews with key informants, the term social accountability, *kanak neiyapheap sangkhum*, is a relatively new concept in Cambodia that is poorly understood by the general public. Among the reasons cited for this lack of understanding is the dearth of experiences in the country of a

responsible and accountable state; and the retarded development of effective state or intermediary institutions as a result of Cambodia's recent history of protracted conflict and violent transitions.

*Kanak neiyapheap sangkhum* (social accountability) is primarily understood as responsibility, honesty, and transparency. Its meaning is closely linked to the moral responsibility (*ka tortuol khos trov prorkorb doy thor*) and obligation of leaders to respond to the needs of the people.

In Cambodian political culture, power is not shared but largely rests on individuals or groups instead of state institutions. As such, SAc between the rulers and the ruled remains weak and blurred.

In recent years, however, social accountability has moved to the forefront of both the Cambodian government's and donor community's

reform agenda, particularly those that focus on good governance, poverty reduction, and democratic development. In fact, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has actively initiated the process of decentralization to develop democratic, participatory, accountable, and effective institutions of government at the provincial/municipal, district/khan, and commune/sangkat levels.

Different stakeholders have varying perceptions of social accountability. Some are very skeptical that it could ever be applied in Cambodian society, given the existing context of political patronage and

control of the dominant political party. Other stakeholders, on the other hand, see the evolving concept of SAc as an opportunity to build trust between state and the citizenry.

This study has also provided a partial list of current SAc practices and tools utilized by civil society organizations, donors, the private sector, and the government. These mechanisms are helping to alter, albeit slowly, the cultural and political landscape of Cambodia. They are also shaping the evolving meaning and understanding of social accountability.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ANSA-EAP commissioned this study on the framing of social accountability in Cambodia. Under the supervision of ANSA-EAP's Research Component, this paper was prepared by the Cambodian Research Team led by Mr. Vireak Kong and Ms. Raskmey Oung. Special thanks to Mr. Sedara Kim who helped provide the conceptual and methodological framework of the study.

ANSA-EAP and the Cambodian Research Team express their gratitude to the practitioners of social accountability who contributed information, shared their experiences, and participated in the Roundtable Discussion on Social Accountability held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on 12 November 2009.

Special thanks to all informants, especially H.E. Ngy Chanphal, Secretary of State, Ministry of Interior, Cambodia; Mr. Heng Monychenda, Director of the Buddhism for Development; Mr. Heang Path, Program Officer of Access to Justice Project, UNDP; Mr. Murari Prasad Upadhyay, Director of CCSP (Commune Council Support Project); and Mr. Heng Raksmeay, Reporter for the Voice of America.

Thanks also to Ms. Ana Maria Clamor for her editorial assistance in preparing this paper for final publication.

This working paper forms part of ANSA-EAP's efforts to bolster the conceptual foundations and practical implementation of social accountability initiatives in Cambodia.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

**C**ambodia has become a modern archetype of reconstruction<sup>1</sup> after experiencing massive social and political collapse due to violence and protracted conflict in the early 70s and into the late 1990s. Some scholars even treat Cambodia as a “failed state” where society is disconcertingly sucked into a maelstrom of anomie<sup>2</sup>.

Since its inception in early 1990s, Cambodian democracy has struggled to muddle through like other unconsolidated democracies following the national elections of 1993, 1998, 2003, and 2008; and decentralization reforms that led to the commune elections in 2002 and 2007. With the broadening of democratic space and the stepping up of development

efforts, it was inevitable for the state to “reconnect” with civil society to enhance its legitimacy. However, the result is some kind of “hybrid” regime characterized by the establishment of democratic institutions (i.e., regular elections and a liberal constitution) but nevertheless operating outside generally accepted democratic norms, values, and procedures<sup>3</sup>.

In post-conflict reconstruction societies like Cambodia, more in-depth democratic processes need to be initiated, institutions built, and civic engagement encouraged. In the long run, political culture must be altered. However, the particular historical juncture, political culture, and regime legitimacy shape the mechanisms for restoring the post-conflict society. In addition, there are political processes evolving on the ground

<sup>1</sup> Joakim Ojendal (2003), *Ten Years of Reconstruction and Reconciliation: What it may mean in Cambodia?* Working Paper No. 6, Department of Peace and Development Research, Goteborg University, Sweden.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Paris (2005), *Towards more effective peace building*, In Menocal Alina and Kilpatrick, Kate (eds.), *Development in Practice* 6(15): 767-777. Marina Ottaway (2002), *Rebuilding State Institutions in Collapsed States. Development and Change* 33(5): 1001-1023.

<sup>3</sup> Joakim Ojendal and Kim, Sedara (2008), *Local Democracy as a strategy for state reconstruction: Decentralization and participation in Cambodia*. In Joakim Ojendal and Mona Lilja 2008, “Beyond Democracy of Cambodia: Post conflict Reconstruction”, NIAS Press.

that compel governments to take values such as accountability, participation, responsiveness, and transparency more seriously<sup>4</sup>.

Currently, the importance of integrating social accountability (SAC) approaches and processes in governance in East Asian and Pacific countries to improve service delivery, enhance welfare, and strengthen citizen's rights has been recognized.

Accountability, however, is an ambiguous and relational concept. Different social, cultural, and historical contexts shape its contents and styles. Various researches have indicated that accountability is one of the most important means in the reform process of the Cambodian government<sup>5</sup>. It has moved to the forefront of both the Cambodian government's and donor community's reform agenda in recent years, particularly those that focus on good governance, poverty reduction, and democratic development.

In Cambodia, accountability between community-based organizations (CBOs) and local authorities remains weak and blurred<sup>6</sup>. This is perhaps because public reform initiatives that donors introduce are Western-oriented, failing to factor in specific social and cultural conditions in the country. As a result, these efforts are poorly understood, much less owned by Cambodian policy makers.

Accountability in the Khmer language is a term that the public does not understand. In Cambodia, vast informal relational networks underlie the formal governance system. These informal networks also shape formal bureaucratic activities and functions. Higher and lower levels of government, civil servants, and politicians lack an adequate understanding of institutional and individual accountability<sup>7</sup>.

In the last seven years, however, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has actively initiated different reforms, such as the holding of commune elections in 2002, the Rectangular Strategy<sup>8</sup> in 2004, and the Organic Law (OL) in 2008 as part of the process of democratic decentralization. The immediate objective of the decentralization and deconcentration (D&D) strategy of the RGC is to develop democratic, participatory, accountable, and effective institutions of government at the provincial/municipal, district/khan, and commune/sangkat levels.

<sup>4</sup> Prum, Sokha (2005), "Decentralization and Poverty Reduction in Cambodia", *Regional Development Dialogue*, 26(2): 114-120. Joakim, Ojendal (2005), "A New Local State in Cambodia? Decentralization as a Political Commodity", In Francis Wah Kok Loh & Joakim Ojendal (eds.), *Southeast Asian Responses to Globalization: Restructuring Governance and Deepening Democracy* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press). Cristina Mansfield & Kurt MacLeod (2004),

<sup>5</sup> Pak, Kimchoeun et al (2007), *Accountability and Neo-Patrimonialism in Cambodia: A critical Literature Review*, Working Paper No.34, Phnom Penh, CDRI. Kim, Sedara (2009), *Democracy in Action: Decentralization Reforms in Post Conflict Cambodia*, PhD Dissertation, School of Global Studies, Goteborg University, Sweden. Buke Adam & Nil, Vanna (2004), *Options for Increasing Social Accountability in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: DFID and World Bank). Kim, Sedara & Joakim Ojendal (2007), *Where Decentralization Meets Democracy: Civil Society, Local Government, and Accountability in Cambodia*, Working Paper No 35, Phnom Penh, CDRI. Caroline Rusten et al. (2004), *The Challenges of Decentralization Design in Cambodia*, Monograph No 1, Phnom Penh, CDRI.

<sup>6</sup> Kim & Ojendal 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Horng Vuthy et al. 2007.

<sup>8</sup> The Rectangular Strategy is the economic policy agenda of the RGC that aims to enhance economic growth, full employment, equity and social justice, and enhanced efficiency of the public sector. Good governance is at the core of the Rectangular Strategy.

Reforms in democratic representation strengthen the sub-national levels by expanding their powers, duties, responsibilities and resources. Participation of the people introduces systems and procedures to ensure that constituents, especially women, vulnerable groups and indigenous minorities, take part in decision making at the local government level. Public sector accountability strengthens accountability at all levels of administration and facilitate citizens' oversight of the administrative and financial affairs of those in the administration. Allowing citizens to participate in planning and monitoring public services will improve effectiveness in the delivery of public services<sup>9</sup>.

---

<sup>9</sup> Royal Government of Cambodia (2005), *Strategic Framework for Decentralization and De-Concentration Reforms*.

Good governance is the cornerstone of the 2004 Rectangular Strategy of the RGC focusing on four reform areas: (1) anti-corruption, (2) legal and judicial reform, (3) public administration reform including decentralization and deconcentration, and (4) reform of the armed forces reform, especially demobilization. The 2008 Organic Law aims to redefine the administrative management and unified administration at the sub-national level of municipality, province, city, and district/khan<sup>10</sup>.

While all these reforms promote and enhance social accountability, the concept remains ambiguous, complex, and poorly understood in Cambodia.

---

<sup>10</sup> Law on Administrative Management of Capital city, Province, cities, district, and *khan*, RGC 2008.



## 2. WORKING DEFINITIONS OF SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

**A**s a general definition, social accountability refers to the broad range of actions and mechanisms beyond voting that citizens can take to help the government be more effective and accountable. It also includes actions on the part of government, civil society, media, and other societal actors that promote or facilitate these efforts. Social accountability approaches also serve to empower citizens and contribute to the evolution of inclusive and cohesive democratic institutions<sup>1</sup>.

The theoretical literature distinguishes two types of accountability: (1) horizontal accountability, between different state agencies via separation of powers; and (2) vertical accountability, between the state and public. Caroline Hughes and Nick Devas (2008) classify accountability into three aspects: First, it requires a relationship of externality between the body owning accountability and the body to whom it is owed in order to avoid conflicts of interest. Second, it

requires a process of social exchange such as mechanisms for the flow of information, explanation and feedback, including the possibility of imposing sanctions. Third, it requires that clear rights of authority are vested in the body to whom accountability is owed.

The Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in East Asia and the Pacific (ANSA-EAP), a regional network that supports and strengthens networks and partners of SAc stakeholders (i.e., CSOs, citizen groups, government, private sector and others), defines social accountability as “actions initiated by citizen groups to hold public officials, politicians, and service providers to account for their conduct and performance in terms of delivering services, improving people’s welfare and protecting people’s rights.”<sup>2</sup>

Both citizen groups and the government are important players of

---

<sup>1</sup> Malena and Chhim, 2008; ANSA-East Asia Pacific 2008.

---

<sup>2</sup> Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in East Asia and the Pacific website: [www.ansa-eap.net](http://www.ansa-eap.net)

social accountability. Government has the duty to facilitate access to all information while citizens must assert their right to participate in governance. Citizens must organize themselves to be able to engage in this kind of participation. The power of collective and organized advocacy work can make citizens a potent force for social transformation<sup>3</sup>.

Enhancing social accountability would depend on the extent of citizens' understanding and willingness to demand accountability from their rulers. Given the fact that the concept of social accountability remains ambiguous and complex, it is important to understand its nature in the broader social, political, cultural, and historical context of Cambodia.

---

**3** Ibid.

### 3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

#### A. Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to understand social accountability in Cambodia—its dimensions, the players involved, and the activities being undertaken. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is the nature of social accountability in Cambodia? What is the historical, socio-political and cultural context that influences how social accountability is understood?
2. Who are the social accountability stakeholders? How is social accountability perceived by different stakeholders?
3. How does social accountability in Cambodia work? What are the mechanisms and tools of social accountability practiced by different groups of people in Cambodian society and what are its core features?

#### B. Methodology

Within a period of four months, the research team conducted in-depth and semi-structured interviews with 34 key informants—directors of 34 organizations ranging from NGOs and CBOs, government officials, the private sector, workers' unions, media groups, youth associations, and other civil society organizations (CSOs) in Phnom Penh, Kompong Speu, Siem Reap, and Battambang provinces.

The research team faced some difficulties explaining the concept of social accountability to respondents from the private sector because they were unfamiliar with the term. However, respondents from NGOs with exposure to donors and activities of international organizations have some understanding of the concept.

The study also reviewed historical archives in Khmer and various documents that are related to social accountability.

## 4. HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

**T**he past few decades of Cambodia's contemporary history have been characterized by a protracted period of conflict. From the early 1970s until 1993, Cambodia underwent many political and economic changes. It transitioned through different political systems—from the monarchy, republic, Stalinist communism and genocide, and more recently, democratic government.

In the 1980s, Cambodia adopted a centralized command economy and later switched to a free market economy. Although the country shifted in the early 1990s from authoritarian rule to a parliamentary form of government, democracy in Cambodia remains imperfectly realized. From one regime to another, power transitions have been usually carried out through fierce fighting and bloodshed. In Cambodian political culture, power is not shared but largely rests on individuals or groups instead of state institutions.<sup>1</sup>

Two related phenomena could be seen occurring within Cambodia's historical context: First, the country has experienced many different political regimes and parties with differing and competitive theories and ideologies over a short period of time. Second, the country has been unable to achieve peaceful transformation of power from one regime to another based on democratic principles. Each political regime in the recent past has not been transformed by democratic power but instead has been overthrown quickly. These serious historical interruptions have held back the development of state institutions and created difficulty in building trust (*ka tuk chet*) and legitimacy between rulers and the ruled. This lack of trust and the dearth of experiences of a responsible and accountable state make it difficult to cultivate an awareness of the contractual relationship between citizens and state, lending weakness to social accountability.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kim, 2009.

## A. Political Culture

Cambodian political culture shares similarities with the political systems of Southeast Asian countries, where individual performance is intertwined with traditional and cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes that affect the way state systems function<sup>2</sup>. Other factors such as patronage, kinship, Buddhism, and rent-seeking<sup>3</sup> behavior also influence social accountability in Cambodia<sup>4</sup>.

The societal structure contains a collection of formal and informal patterns, each interacting with kinship, shared beliefs and religion, the court, and the elite. Remaining largely intact in Cambodian society is the Buddhist concept of karma and merit making, which is the belief that a person's status in society in his present life is determined by his performance in the previous life<sup>5</sup>. Personal status can be improved by virtuous actions, sponsoring temples, and community development.

The relationship between leaders and followers is based on patronage and it shapes the perceptions of people on power, politics, and economics. Steep power differentials, which prohibit the ability

of citizens to claim rights and freedom in the face of official high-handedness<sup>6</sup>, generally characterize power relations between state officials and civilians. Most Cambodians view contact with representatives of the state at any level as threatening and something that should be avoided if possible. Power is not shared; it is accumulated and protected. Cambodian rulers build their political systems based on familiar aspects of traditional political culture, aiming to promote democracy within an authoritarian political model (John 2005).

The central symbolism of Cambodian political culture revolves around the idea of power, which is decidedly a zero-sum game. Securing compliance and power is accumulated by force or strength (komlaing), which is believed to belong to the semantic nexus of the warrior image. The power of Cambodian society rests in the person of high officials, not in its offices or institutions. As such, power is personalised and serves the purpose of the leaders rather than the public. Cambodian political life assumes a form of patronage that is hierarchical and absolutist, creating weak state institutions as the channel of power goes through political/private party lines. This culture of patronage tolerates deviant behaviour by those who violate the social norms without serious consequences. The way Cambodian rulers exercise power does not serve to promote democracy in the form of institutional arrangement, moral responsibility, and political tolerance. Rather, power is used as an absolute

<sup>2</sup> Hanks, Lucien. 1962, "Merit and power in the Thai Social Order." *American Anthropologist* 64: 1247-1261.

<sup>3</sup> Rent seeking happens when an organization or individual uses their resources to obtain economic gain from others without reciprocating any benefits back to society through wealth creation.

<sup>4</sup> Ebihara, May (1968), *'Svay, a Khmer Village in Cambodia'*, PhD. Dissertation (Department of Anthropology, Columbia University: NY). Chandler, David (2003), *A History of Cambodia* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books).

<sup>5</sup> Kim, Sedara (2001), *Reciprocity: Informal Patterns of Interaction in a village near Angkor Park*, M.A Thesis, Department of Anthropology, Northern Illinois University, Dekalb, Illinois.

<sup>6</sup> Hughes 2003.

means to enforce compliance and build the coercive strength of the leaders.

## B. Political Institutions and Elections

A weak state—controlled by all-powerful leaders with strong political machinery—features prominently in Cambodia’s long history of conflict. In the post-war period, party competition has become more pluralist with free elections regularly organized by Cambodians themselves. Yet the degree of institutionalization has been strongly influenced by the configuration of powerful political parties. While many researches have shown that citizens as voters are aware of electoral accountability, elections are constrained by strong control of political parties, vote buying, and sometimes intimidation<sup>7</sup>. These constraints discourage people from exercising their free will when choosing their leaders. Political parties and party activists do not fully subscribe to nor practice democratic principles. Political parties that control the state do not distinguish between their private interests and those of the public. Information flows through local authorities and the political party network.

In a recent survey<sup>8</sup> conducted in five provinces, 583 voters were asked, “If the elected commune councilors are not accountable to voters or do not serve the voter, do you have the power to change them in the next election?” About 90% of voter respondents said that they could vote

the elected Commune Council members out of office, indicating citizens’ growing awareness of the power of the ballot.

## C. Citizen-State Relations

Different researches show that Cambodian society lacks formal organizational structures<sup>9</sup>. The social interaction of peasants revolves around kinship ties at the level of the individual household and the nuclear family. Despite some forms of community coherence, most of civil society interactions in Cambodian society, particularly in rural communities, are embedded in patron-client and rent-seeking relations. The horizontal and downward accountability line of interaction largely occurs within the relationships among villagers, kinsmen, close friends, neighbors, and the Buddhist temple (wat). Social interaction within Cambodian society is informal and does not reach far beyond kinsmen, close friends, and neighbors. Some studies have emphasized that Cambodia lacks intermediary institutions to close the gap between the state and society or between the rural and central authorities. Bit Seanglim makes his observation of Cambodian society:

It is noteworthy that Cambodian culture has not developed any other social institutions or groups beyond the family structure which might facilitate the concept of collective social responsibility. Cambodia does not have a tradition of associations,

<sup>7</sup> Kim 2009; TAF/CAS 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Kim, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Bit, Seanglim (1991), *The Warrior Heritage: A Psychological Perspective of Cambodian Trauma*; Thion, Serge (1993), *Watching Cambodia* (White Lotus).



volunteer groups, trade unions, or other networks composed of people who come together for a common purpose. The formats of religious traditions are decentralized with an emphasis on the immediate locale and the village temple. Opportunities for exchanging experiences, cooperation, or identifying with a larger group are restricted to the groups which already form the basis for a social identity, namely the family and the village (Bit 1991: 49).

According to Bit, Cambodian society is missing two key aspects: (1) collective social responsibility / accountability facilitated by intermediary institutions; and (2) a tradition of associations that come together for a common purpose.

## 5. NATURE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN CAMBODIA

**C**ivil society is one of the most powerful forces along with social capital and civility that could promote democratic development. Gordon White defines civil society as “an intermediate associational realm between state and family populated by organizations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state, and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values”<sup>1</sup>. Civil society organizations perform the role of raising people’s political consciousness and mobilizing them to challenge the power of the state. This form of participation can help to restrain the power of the elite while increasing the power of society.

Discussions about civil society in Cambodia have largely revolved around NGOs, often international NGOs and

their clients<sup>2</sup>. The study of Kim and Ann (2005) classifies grassroots organizations in Cambodia into two primary types: (1) organic groups, which are traditional and have been in existence in Cambodian society for many generations; and (2) mandated groups, which are often established by international organizations. The latter groups are fairly new in Cambodian society. The same study has identified the existing organic and mandated groups in rural areas in Cambodia with a partial list below<sup>3</sup>:

- *Wat or Pagoda Committee*: This usually represents more than one village and typically consists of senior, well-respected volunteers

<sup>1</sup> Gordon White (1994), “Civil society, Democratization and Development: Clearing the Analytical Ground” *Democratization*, 1(Autumn) pp 379.

<sup>2</sup> Un, Kheang (2005), ‘Democratization Without Consolidation: The Case of Cambodia, 1993–2004,’ PhD Dissertation, (DeKalb Illinois Department of Political Science, Northern Illinois University)

<sup>3</sup> Kim, Sedara & Ann, Sovatha (2005), *Can Civil Society Enhance Local Government’s Accountability in Cambodia?* ADR/CDRI, 9(3) p 5.

who help and represent the pagoda. Members are not usually elected.

- *School Support Committee (SSC)*: This is usually composed of respected people, teachers, school principals, local authority representatives, and parents. Its main task is to safeguard and ensure the sustainability of school activities.
- *Funeral Committee*: This is not a permanent group but is formed to help poor families that cannot afford a proper funeral.
- *Midwife Association* (also known as *Health Association*): Often operating with technical support from NGOs, its primary task is to assist in promoting hygiene awareness and to help bring the sick to provincial clinics if necessary.
- *Help the Aged Association*: This group is formed to help poor elderly people in the community. It usually consists of senior, respected people, and members of the Wat Committee.
- *Water Users Association*: This is formed in communes with a need for active water management. This association is responsible for allocating water use among farmers, maintaining, and constructing irrigation systems.
- *Dry Season Rice Cultivation Association*: This is formed only in locations where there is a possible water source for dry season rice cultivation. Its task is to mobilize resources and improve the water supply. In some provinces, it is the same as the Water Users Association.
- *Savings Association*: Sometimes this is synonymous to a rice or pig

bank to provide mutual help to members.

- *Community Fishery*: This is often formed in areas adjacent to a fishing ground. It assumes the role of a watchdog for illegal fishing activities and cooperates with fishery officers and local authorities to stop fishing crimes. The local fishing community often gets technical support from different international NGOs.
- *Forest Community*: This is set up among local communities to protect forests from illegal logging and to replant fallen trees. It often receives technical support from international NGOs but is not explicitly part of commune jurisdiction.
- *Road Maintenance Committee*: This is often created through the CCs but does not exist in all communes.

In his study on civil society, public space, and democratization in Cambodia, Kheang Un points out that efforts of civil society organizations to push for judicial reforms have been weak because they lack a systematic strategy. The ineffectiveness of Cambodian NGOs (CNGOs) stems from its urban-based character because they emerged from international political support and engagement. The rise of CNGOs has not been accompanied by an enlargement of democratic space in rural areas. Another factor that makes CNGOs ineffective is their own organizational structures, operations, and top-down mode of internal governance, which fall short of being democratic<sup>4</sup> and mirror the

<sup>4</sup> Kheang, Un 2004.

patron-client relationships endemic in Cambodian political culture.

There are many factors that make it difficult for genuine civil society to grow in the current political arena of Cambodia. The state continues to restrict democratic space, limiting NGOs' ability to expand their activities and promote further democratic consolidation. NGOs' dependence on foreign funding and lack of membership prevent them from sustaining their activities. Within this political context, CNGOs mostly adhere to

a non-confrontational stance vis-à-vis the state, focusing on persuasion to transform government leaders' moral values by alerting them to the problems of human rights abuses, corruption, nepotism, and lack of rule of law<sup>5</sup>.

---

<sup>5</sup> Kim & Kong 2008; Hughes 2003; Un 2004.

## 6. SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY CAMBODIA

**T**here are very few academic researches on SAc in Cambodia. Below is a review of some pertinent studies:

Michael Barton's "Empowering a New Civil Society" (2001) reveals that the growth and strength of civil society organizations in Cambodia has depended on the presence of donor agencies, the prevailing political situation, government support and recognition, and the development of local communities and Cambodian society as a whole. Since most civil society organizations are financially dependent on donors, they are more accountable toward donors. The prevailing political situation presents a challenge for civil society organizations to mount large scale demonstrations because many NGOs fear a direct confrontation with the government. It is also very difficult for grassroots civil society organizations to grow in a sustained manner because it is hard to mobilize people who are more

oriented to material output<sup>1</sup>. With a weak civil society, demanding social accountability remains a stiff challenge in Cambodia. The government should allow more space for NGOs and civil society to work effectively.

In "Cambodia Governance Analysis", Hughes and Un (2006) analyze three main elements of governance: (1) state capacity, (2) accountability, and (3) responsiveness. They distinguish between two types of type of governance in state capacity: white hat and black hat. White hat governance conforms broadly to rational-legal modes; while black hat governance operates via entrepreneurial and personal relationships. Black hat governance is devoted to a great extent to rent-seeking practices. Organized around allegiances based upon marriage, kinship, and a network of patronage,

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Barton (2001), *Empowering a new civil society*, Pact Cambodia.

black hat governance predominates in Cambodian politics. However, in the past fifteen years, it has been necessary for black hat governance to be counterbalanced by sufficient white hat activity to maintain cordial relations with Cambodia's donors.

At any rate, the government continues to be reluctant to establish systematic accountability measures through the promotion of an independent judiciary with real powers to scrutinize the activities of the state. Thus, the two types of governance co-exist and shape the level of accountability in Cambodia. With the prevalence of corruption and rent-seeking practices, government is largely unresponsive to the promotion of political, civil and economic rights of the poor. However, there have been some improvements in government responsiveness through the decentralization and deconcentration reforms<sup>2</sup>.

In "Where Decentralization Meets Democracy: Civil Society, Local Government, and Accountability in Cambodia", Kim and Ojendal (2007) look at the relationship between CBOs and local government, particularly elected Commune Councils. The participation and mobilization of CBOs is generally weak because people lack commitment. Only the chiefs and deputies of CBOs are active at the beginning but they cease implementing activities when funding dries up. Individual self-interest largely drives the social dynamics in rural communities. Nonetheless, the current relationship

between CBOs and the elected commune council is generally good because it does not involve money and power. The study shows that CCs are performing relatively well. They are downwardly accountable and responsive to voters but face many difficulties because most of powers that are supposed to be devolved to them are still with the line agencies<sup>3</sup>.

The study, "Accountability: and Neo-Patrimonialism in Cambodia: A Critical Literature Review" (2007), describes Cambodian society as hybridized, combining many informal elements such as neo-patrimonialism<sup>4</sup> and rent-seeking. Patronage networks especially penetrate ministries in charge of exploiting resources and disrupt effective public administration and service delivery. Entrenched and institutionalized from the national to local levels, the current state of neo-patrimonialism in Cambodia undermines judicial accountability and the formal system of checks and balances<sup>5</sup>.

Covering 310 communes and randomly sampling 620 councilors and 1,240 voters as respondents, the survey conducted by Kim Ninh and Roger Henke (2005) shows that more than 90% of voters trust the CCs than the provincial and national government. About 85% of voters expressed that all projects carried out by CCs are beneficial to the community. However, respondents do not make a clear

<sup>2</sup> Caroline Hughes and Kheang, Un, *Cambodia Governance Analysis* (Unpublished draft).

<sup>3</sup> Kim & Ojendal, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Patrimonialism is a type of rule in which the ruler does not distinguish between personal and public patrimony and treats matters and resources of state as his personal affair, (also see Horng et al 2007) .

<sup>5</sup> Pak et al 2007.



distinction made between the work of the political party and the commune. About 70% of the CC members surveyed endorse the statement that they are subordinate to district and provincial authorities. Voters see the following challenges of elected CCs: not being responsive and accountable due to the lack of funds, limited skills and capacity, lack of authority to generate local revenues, and interference by district, province, and national government<sup>6</sup>.

In “Linking Citizens and the State: An Assessment of Civil Society Contributions to Good Governance in Cambodia,” Carmen Malena and Kristina Chhim (2008) analyze the concept of SAc in Cambodia along four major dimensions: (1) information, (2) voice, (3) association, and (4) constructive dialogue and participation. According to the study, 80% of public information is obtained from broadcast media, mostly radio and TV; and 30% to 40% of public information is obtained through local authorities (i.e., village chiefs and CCs), relatives, friends, and neighbors. While information is crucial in enabling people to find out about government performance, the report has found that there is a lack of demand for information from public and government officials, who, in turn, are not accustomed to sharing information to the public.

#### Findings from Malena and Chhim’s study

<sup>6</sup> Kim Ninh and Roger Henke (2005), *Commune Council in Cambodia: A National Survey on their Functions and Performance, with a Special focus on Conflict Resolution*, Center for Advanced Study and The Asia Foundation, Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Kim Ninh and Roger Henke (2005), *Commune Council in Cambodia: A National Survey on their Functions and Performance, with a Special focus on Conflict Resolution*, Center for Advanced Study and The Asia Foundation, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

show that citizens are interested to voice their opinions to their leaders. A high percentage (71%) of respondents have attended commune meetings but their participation has been largely passive. They are physically present but are reluctant to express their ideas, especially any form of criticism of government actions.

The study also shows that about 66% of CSOs belong to traditional associations that adopt more informal ways of engagement. This is a positive sign that decentralization at the commune level has created more space to increase the relationship between CBOs/CSOs with elected CCs. However, many urban-based NGOs in Cambodia are rarely membership organizations and most of them lack grassroots constituencies.

Malena and Chhim’s study confirms the lack of awareness of citizen’s rights and the responsibilities of government officials and the citizenry resulting in weak social contract. Even civil society actors engaged in advocacy assess their impact as limited, especially with regards to influencing policy implementation, budgeting, and expenditures. Unable to mediate more effectively between state and society, they feel that they have not succeeded in bringing about broad-based impacts or structural reforms. Thus, there is a lack of constructive dialogue and meaningful participation in the public sphere.

A 2008 baseline survey conducted by the National Committee for the Management of Decentralization and Deconcentration Reforms (NCDD) in five provinces shows that more than 80% of respondents have

not heard of the word “accountability” in Khmer. More than 90% of respondents have not lodged a formal complaint against their commune council. About 65% of respondents agree that CCs are more accountable to voters and the public. Half (56%) of the respondents feel that commune council authorities keep citizens properly informed. About 72% of respondents agree to some degree that their CCs are responsive to their priority needs, which are mostly small scale infrastructures. However, most of the voters do not know the funding sources of commune projects<sup>7</sup>.

An upcoming study by Kim Sedara has likewise found that people generally agree that CCs are responsive to voters’ needs to a certain extent. However, the quantity and speed of CC’s responsiveness remain limited. The concept of accountability and its Khmer term is not understood by the majority of people. The study has also found that citizens’ and government

officials’ awareness of rights and social contract is limited and weak. Since CCs are not allowed to collect local revenues, their limited financial resources make it difficult for them to be responsive and accountable to voters. Their only sources of revenue are the central government and political parties.<sup>8</sup>

Another survey conducted by the Center for Advanced Study (CAS) and Pact in 2008<sup>9</sup> shows that after more than six years since the first commune elections, many citizens remain unclear about the mandate of commune councils, with nearly a quarter of respondents (22%) unable to independently identify any role attributable to the commune council. Contact between the CC and voters is as limited as the information regarding CC functions. While recognizing a degree of local corruption, voters largely trust the commune council and would not object to increasing the power of the CC.

---

<sup>7</sup> Baseline Surveys (2008) by National Committee for Management of Decentralization and Deconcentration Reforms (NCDD), Ministry of Interior.

---

<sup>8</sup> See Kim, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> 2008 LAAR Survey of Citizen and Councilor Perceptions of Commune Councils, Center for Advanced Study and PACT, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

## 7. KHMER VOCABULARY OF ACCOUNTABILITY

In the English-Khmer dictionary, the term *kanak neiyapheap* (accountable/accountability) means *tortoul khos trov* (responsibility) or *arch ponyul bann* (explainable or able to explain) (Huffman & Im, 1987). *Sangkhum* is the Khmer word for social or society.

The Khmer word for social accountability is *kanak neiyapheap sangkhum*. However, an overwhelming majority of respondents in two surveys do not know or have not heard of the term *kanak neiyapheap*—95% of voter respondents in Kim’s upcoming study<sup>1</sup> and 80% of respondents in the NCDD survey<sup>2</sup>. In Kim’s study, 81% of CC member respondents have heard of *kanak neiyapheap* but have given mixed definitions.

*Kanak neiyapheap* (social accountability) is primarily understood as responsibility, honesty, and transparency. A closer look at the Khmer term for responsibility, *tortoul khos trov*, shows that its meaning is related to the definition of accountability. It means being responsible for doing the wrong thing (*tortoul khos*) and being responsible for doing the right thing (*tortoul trov*). The meaning of SAc is also linked to the moral responsibility (*ka tortuol khos trov prorkorb doy thor*) and obligation of leaders to respond to the needs of the people. *Ak phibalkech laar* (good governance) is an ideal type of leadership or benevolent leadership characterized by transparency, responsibility, and absence of corruption. This is a relatively new term that was used in the 1990s to describe the functional, responsive, and accountable administration of the state.

*Neak Doeuk Norm* is the Khmer word for leader or someone who takes the lead for a particular task or duty. One of

<sup>1</sup> Respondents in this upcoming survey involves 583 voters and 74 CC members.

<sup>2</sup> Baseline Surveys (2008) by National Committee for Management of Decentralization and Deconcentration Reforms (NCDD), Ministry of Interior.

the valued characteristics of a leader is honesty and trustworthiness. *Ka tuk chet* or *smarmos trang* (trust or honest) refers to a person who neither cheats nor lies, and acts with honor and respect. This is related to the moral responsibility of individuals, especially those in positions of authority or power (*komlaing*).

*Kar tor sou mate* or advocacy and expressing or voicing ideas is one of the ways in which citizens can exact accountability from the government. *Kar tor sou mate* literally means “to struggle

for an idea,” a term coined by the NGOs in the late 1990s<sup>3</sup>. This term is not widely understood outside the NGO community. Many NGOs form networks (*bandaine*) to promote or advance their causes.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ana Maria Clamor, *To Struggle for an Idea: An Advocacy Training Manual for Cambodians*, Phnom Penh: NGO Forum on Cambodia, 2000, [www.ngoforum.org.kh/Core/Advocacy%20Training%20Manual.pdf](http://www.ngoforum.org.kh/Core/Advocacy%20Training%20Manual.pdf)

## 8. STAKEHOLDERS' VIEWS ON SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

**A**ll informants interviewed affirm that the concept of SAc is new to the Cambodian people. International NGOs and donor agencies recognize that SAc works differently depending on the social, economic, cultural and political context. In the Cambodian context, the political culture of patronage system, hierarchy, and rent-seeking practices has always been interwoven into the fabric of Cambodian society. Party politics remains the dominant factor shaping people's interaction with the state.

Mr. Heang Path, Program Officer of Access to Justice Project of UNDP, says

"The concept of SAc is very new in Cambodian society .... Traditional norms such as patronage, hierarchy, kinship ties, and rent-seeking ... are very much alive in contemporary Cambodia."<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Heng Monychenda, Director of Buddhism for Development and an experienced civil society actor in Battambang province, is skeptical and regards the concept of SAc as complex and difficult to apply in the social realm:

"When we talk about SAc, one needs to think about the term of accountability which can't be applied in Cambodian society because of the lack of explanation of this new and complex term and concept. If you look carefully, the concept of accountability is related to financial figures and numbers. As such, the concept needs to be exact and quantifiable, which is not possible in the social realm. To clarify its meaning, it is good to ask the question, accountable to whom and by whom? The concept is related to social responsibility and state responsibility or state and people responsibility."<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Interview on 2 September 2008.

---

<sup>2</sup> Interview on 30 October 2008.

Mr. Heng Raksmeay, Reporter for the Voice of America, likewise expresses his pessimism on the nature of SAc in Cambodia and CSOs:

“In order to improve citizens’ engagement, every institution in Cambodia has to be independent and the law should be the basic foundation. There are more than 2,000 civil society organizations established in Cambodia but these organizations work for different purposes. Some work for government, political parties, individuals, and for public interest. About 80% of civil society organizations serve the party in power and pay no attention to the interests of citizens.”<sup>3</sup>

Many respondents from the NGO sector tend to take a critical position vis-à-vis the government when expressing their views on SAc. Some informants, however, see the concept of SAc as a new chance to enhance trust between state and society. H.E. Ngy Chanphal, a senior government official at the Mol, says that focusing on the practical application of SAc is more important than the way the term is called:

“When we talk about the concept of SAc, especially in the Cambodian context, it is a new concept. However, if we can understand it well and implement it properly, it would bring in new opportunities for our country. The term is viewed differently by different actors. To me, the term is similar to the Buddhist teaching which is understood in Cambodian society as social

responsibility. The way we call it is not important. The practical mechanism is more important; whatever is suitable for this society.”<sup>4</sup>

Many respondents have suggested linking the concept of SAc to practical issues of social responsibility. What is the state’s responsibility to its citizens? What are the responsibilities of citizens?

SAc is normally initiated by NGOs that embrace ideas imposed by international NGOs or donor agencies. There are currently more than 3,000 NGOs operating in Cambodia but they do not work closely together. They follow different agendas, work on a short-term basis, and are only accountable to their donors. Mr. Murari Prasad Upadhyay, Director of the Commune Council Support Project (CCSP), says that

“When NGOs work individually, they have no voice and are not strong enough to ask for involvement from local authorities. NGOs and CBOs should work collectively to build up a good network and be answerable to the citizens.”<sup>5</sup>

The weak demand for good governance from citizens could be attributed to poverty and low educational attainment. As Mr. Heng Monychenda puts it,

“Demanding good governance or having SAc is important for our society. However, these aspects are

<sup>3</sup> Interview on 4 October 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Interview on 5 November 2008

<sup>5</sup> Interview on 7 November 2008.



too complex for ordinary people to understand. To improve demand-side governance or SAc, all relevant institutions should cultivate this idea at the grassroots level and make it more accessible and practical to everyone. The Cambodian government would not respond unless there is a strong demand. It is all about demand.”<sup>6</sup>

Accountability does not rely on one set of players or stakeholders, such as NGOs and CSOs, to act alone and independently. It requires many institutions, both government and non-government, to be actively engaged. They have to interact and work together. Different institutions and agencies, however, bring challenges or inconsistencies because they have different interests and development agendas. This slows down the process of promoting social accountability in Cambodia.

Most commune council members in the rural areas are the older and respected residents in the community. Except for the commune clerk, many of them are illiterate, unable to absorb and remember new ideas and new things. Ordinary people are also not aware of their right to demand the delivery of public services. Because they do not know their roles as constituents, they do not see it as their responsibility to hold commune councils or government accountable.

In addition, it is not easy to exact accountability at the grassroots level because majority of commune council members come from the ruling party, Cambodian People's Party (CPP), and very few from opposition parties. This means that most commune councils toe the party line. In many cases, the government budget and expenditure is kept from the public.

---

<sup>6</sup> Interview on 30 October 2008.

## 9. SOME SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY PRACTICES AND TOOLS

**D**espite the weak state of SAc in Cambodia, the increasing number of initiatives from NGOs shows promising signs. For instance, the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC) has played a major role, since its inception in 1991, in strengthening cooperation between NGOs in Cambodia and has actively liaised with the RGC and donor agencies on NGO matters.

Through its Analyzing Development Issues (ADI) Project, CCC has offered training courses to Cambodian NGO managers and field workers to develop critical thinking that would improve their work and respond to changing conditions in Cambodia. The ADI courses enable participants to understand development issues in Cambodia, develop their ability to link micro experiences to macro trends, and build their confidence to meaningfully contribute to discussions and debates. Through the ADI, NGOs are equipped with the skills and knowledge to engage with government on policy issues<sup>1</sup>.

The Commune Council Support Project (CCSP), a project of a coalition of nine international and national NGOs in Cambodia, has a program to award best practices in civil society-commune council partnerships and collaboration in local governance reform. These best practices invariably involve elected officials who are responsive to the needs of their constituents, which is the primary indicator of social accountability<sup>2</sup>. CCSP also has the NGOs Liaison Office (NLO-CCSP) that links government and CSOs to sustain a positive relationship and enable CSOs to give feedback to RGC on the implementation of D&D reform policies<sup>3</sup>.

The Committee for Free and Fair Election in Cambodia (COMFREL) conducts education and public forums to encourage citizens to participate in politics and decision-making, advocacy/lobby for electoral reforms that

<sup>1</sup> From the webpage of CCC: [http://www.ccc-](http://www.ccc-cambodia.org/ADI%20Project/ADIProject.htm)

[cambodia.org/ADI%20Project/ADIProject.htm](http://www.ccc-cambodia.org/ADI%20Project/ADIProject.htm)

<sup>2</sup> From the webpage of CCSP: [http://www.ccspcambodia.org/doku.php?id=programs:info\\_and\\_doc](http://www.ccspcambodia.org/doku.php?id=programs:info_and_doc)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

increase accountability of elected officials and provide comprehensive monitoring data to enable an objective, non-partisan assessment of the fulfillment of political platform and performance of elected officials. COMFREL has its origins in the Task Force on Cambodia, which came together to provide an independent, non-partisan domestic monitoring team for the May 1993 UNTAC elections. COMFREL worked in close collaboration with the relevant international organizations throughout Cambodia to monitor the electoral process before, during, and after polling day. In 1995, a decision was made to establish COMFREL as a permanent election monitoring organization. In 1997, COMFREL registered with the Ministry of Interior and thereafter was recognized by the National Election Committee (NEC) as one of three organizations to be given priority in observing the 1998 National Assembly election. During the 1998 National Assembly election, COMFREL's network extended to the village level nationwide, with 11,000 volunteer observers covering almost 95% of polling stations. COMFREL is currently revamping its network and has plans for added capacity building in advance of the planned commune/*sangkat* council elections<sup>4</sup>.

Amara, an NGO based in Battambang province that is involved in issues related to gender/women and human rights/

democracy, has facilitated the successful and sustainable implementation of commune development plans.

Buddhism for Development (BFD), an NGO promoting socially-engaged Buddhism in Cambodia, has about 2,000 Peace Development Volunteers (PDVs) who play a role at the grassroots level in increasing public awareness of basic human rights, the rule of law, and peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms. The PDVs are the new emerging educated elites at the grassroots level that can promote social accountability.

The Cambodian Center for Study and Development in Agriculture (CEDAC) is considered the biggest agriculture and rural development NGO in Cambodia, providing direct assistance to about 100,000 families in 20 provinces in the country. CEDAC helped set up the first national farmer network in 2003 by providing coordination and capacity-building support. Farmer organizations have become vital for the development of sustainable agriculture in Cambodia and could function as the mechanism for members to voice their demands on government. A case in point are the farmer associations in Kompong Thom province that worked together to ban the importation of pigs to Cambodia.

---

<sup>4</sup> From the webpage of CCC: <http://www.ccc-cambodia.org/ADI%20Project/ADIProject.htm>

Below is a sampling of SAc tools that international NGOs and donor agencies use:

SAc Tools	Agency Using the Tool
Outreach, monitoring, and social development	Pact
Training, advocacy, assisting in forming CBOs or grassroots networks, and information sharing	
Coordinating with government to form private sector-government public forum	IFC
Assisting private sectors in creating a cartel of rice millers, brick making, and construction associations/unions to improve investment climate	IFC
Research and survey	CCSP, Pact
Improving capacity of the Chamber of Commerce	IFC
Citizen Rating Reports (CRR), improving capacity of elected CCs, networking, improving capacity of NGOs/CBOs	CCSP
Cooperating with government on D&D and work on the reform process of the sub-national level (district and provincial level).	
Community Management Course (CMC)	Fur Die Freiheit

The SAc tools that local NGOs (LNGOs) use are similar to the tools that donors and international agencies use:

SAc Tools	Agency Using the Tool
Advocacy, networking, information sharing, training, rural livelihood development	Most LNGOs
Citizen Advisor	KID
Collaboration and networking with local and sub national government	COMFREL, CCC
Hearing, speaking, complaining, demanding role and responsibility of leaders or state	BFD
Advocacy, electoral education, election monitoring, training	COMFREL
Mediation and conflict resolution	Arbitration Council Foundation
Teaching children and raising awareness on hygiene, environment to school children	Youth associations, Mlup Bai Tong
Training, research	ADI, CCC
Spot-checking, Staff capacity building, monitoring, and coaching. Cooperating with sub-national government and improve capacity of CCs	Amara
Public dialogue, training, advocacy	Silaka
Tripartite mechanism for conflict resolution	Arbitration Council Foundation
Monitoring the national budget	NGO Forum

The private or business sector is an emerging civil society stakeholder that can contribute to social accountability in Cambodia even if a segment of this sector, the economic elite, is strongly criticized for being closely associated with top politicians and adopting rent-seeking practices. However, most private sector groups are not aware that they are using SAc tools and mechanisms that influence the government, such as the formation of networks and associations, because they view themselves as entirely operating separately from the state, with very limited and occasional engagement on social issues.

Nonetheless, the Federation of Rice Millers is a good example of a CS stakeholder that is using the strength of their increasing numbers to lobby the government. It was established to represent the interests of Cambodian millers, and to increase value added in domestic rice processing.

Below is an initial list of the SAc tools that the private sector is using:

- Public forum between the private sector and government that is held twice a year.
- Formation of eight working groups such as export processing, SME, tourism, agriculture and rice miller associations, banking, finance, energy, transportation, and infrastructure that

attend the public forums.

- Active engagement to influence policy through the Chamber of Commerce
- Creation of different occupational associations such as rice millers associations, brick mill associations, construction associations, and labor unions.
- Engaging with international agencies such as IFC, WB, ADB, and JICA for professional business development through training and study tours.

Many media organizations, particularly newspapers, do not exercise independence and professionalism, and often act as mouthpieces of political parties. Only a few media groups operate independently of the government and political parties, such as VOA and RFA. Those that push for SAc from the state use tools that are risky or confrontational and make them vulnerable to reprisals. Labor unions use similar SAc tools as listed below:

- Advocacy via printed media such as newspapers and magazines
- Broadcast media radio and TV
- Training and creation of associations
- Public demonstration and strike
- Advocacy with government on labor laws to improve the working condition of workers

At any rate, the government has shown increasing signs of being socially accountable. Many leaders, especially the elected ones, are listening and cooperating with CSOs. Below are some of the tools that the Cambodian government uses to exercise social accountability:

- Creating relevant policies and conducting policy dialogues
- Inter-ministerial collaboration
- Training and dissemination of information
- Coordination with donors and NGOs/CSOs
- Construction of needed local infrastructure and delivery of basic services

## 10. CONCLUSION

From the review of available literature and interviews with key informants, the term social accountability, *kanak neiyapheap sangkhum*, is a relatively new concept in Cambodia that is poorly understood by the general public. Among the reasons cited for this lack of understanding is the dearth of experiences in the country of a responsible and accountable state. Cambodia's recent history of protracted conflict and violent transitions has retarded the development of effective state or intermediary institutions beyond the family and kinship system that could facilitate the concept of collective social responsibility.

By and large, political power has rested on individuals or groups instead of state institutions. Power (*komlaing*) has been used to enforce compliance and build the coercive strength of leaders within a system of patronage instead of serving the interests of the public. With the lack of legitimacy and trust between the rulers and the ruled, there is little awareness of the contractual relationship between citizens and state. As a result, the people do not demand social accountability from the state

and the state does not practice it. The weak demand for good governance from citizens could also be attributed to poverty and low educational attainment.

The increase in development efforts in post-conflict Cambodia has led to the establishment of democratic institutions, such as the ratification of a liberal constitution and the holding of regular elections, and the broadening of democratic space through decentralization and deconcentration. The result is a hybrid regime where rational/legal (white hat) and patronage/neo-patrimonial (black hat) modes of governance co-exist.

Respondents who are familiar with the concept of SAc primarily understand it as responsibility, honesty, and transparency. SAc is semantically related to the concept of social responsibility (*kanak neiyak pheap sangkum*) or moral responsibility (*ka tortuol khos trov prorkorb doy thor*) of the leaders and citizens. Responsibility (*tortuol khos trov*) is a popular term that ordinary people use and understand. The Buddhist belief in karma and



merit-making play an important role in reinforcing moral behavior. Leaders are morally responsible to use their authority to respond to the needs of the people. After many elections on the national and local levels, people are starting to be aware of their rights as citizens to hold their elected officials accountable.

The primary SAc stakeholders are civil society organizations because they perform the role of raising people's political consciousness and mobilizing them to challenge the power of the state. In Cambodia, there are two types of grassroots organizations: (1) organic groups, which are traditional and have been in existence in Cambodian society for many generations; and (2) mandated groups, which have recently emerged through the support of international organizations. Other civil society stakeholders are media organizations, labor unions, occupational groups, youth associations, and the private sector.

These different stakeholders have varying perceptions of SAc. Some NGOs who are very critical of government are skeptical that SAc could ever be applied in Cambodian society—given the existing context of political patronage and control of the dominant political party; the lack of awareness and demand from the public; and the disjointed efforts and conflicting agendas, and sometimes undemocratic character, of NGOs, including their dependence of external financial support. On the other hand, some key informants see the evolving concept of SAc as an opportunity to build trust between state and the citizenry.

The increasing number of initiatives from NGOs shows that despite the weak state of social accountability in Cambodia, there have been some modest gains in closely collaborating with government and enabling them to be more responsive to the public. The tools range from training and capacity-building, monitoring of elections and government performance to public forums and dialogue, advocacy, education and awareness-raising, mediation and conflict-resolution, and formation of associations and networks. Confrontational modes include public demonstration and strike. Emerging civil society stakeholders, such as federations and occupational associations, use the strength of their numbers to engage with and lobby government.

To enable the public to understand SAc, the focus should be on its practical application—the tools and mechanisms used by citizens and stakeholders—rather than its conceptual explanation. However, the largely state-controlled media in Cambodia presents veritable constraints in disseminating information on SAc to the public.

At the grassroots level, it is important to use existing local and traditional mechanisms instead of introducing new SAc mechanisms. For instance, each Commune Council is required to set up an accountability box and bulletin board. After seven years, however, villagers still do not write any suggestions or complaints in the box or come to read the information posted on the bulletin board. Instead, information is disseminated in meetings and spread through word of mouth.

The best mechanism to help Cambodian society internalize the importance of social accountability is to introduce it in the educational curriculum and to target the youth (i.e. aged 24 and below), which comprise roughly 60% of the country's population, in awareness-raising programs. The post-war generation would be more exposed and more open to democratic practices and new ideas. An educated citizenry is more likely to demand social accountability from the government.

Persuasive and collaborative modes of demanding social accountability from the government appear to produce more favorable results than confrontational approaches.

The government, in turn, has exercised social accountability in various forms, such as construction of needed infrastructure

and delivery of basic services at the local level and conducting policy dialogues with CSOs at the national level. In recent years, the RGC has actively initiated various democratic reforms, especially decentralization and deconcentration, and placed good governance at the center of the RGC's economic policy agenda. This bodes well for further democratic consolidation in the country.

Increasing civil society engagement and recent democratic reforms are the important processes that are slowly altering the cultural and political landscape of Cambodia. They are shaping the evolving meaning, understanding, and practice of social accountability in the country.

## References

- Baseline Surveys (2008) by National Committee for Management of Decentralization and Deconcentration Reforms (NCDD), Ministry of Interior.
- Barton, Michael (2001). *Empowering a New Civil Society*, PACT Cambodia.
- Bit, Seanglim (1991). *The Warrior Heritage: A Psychological Perspective of Cambodian Trauma*, Seanglim Bit.
- Buke Adam & Nil, Vanna (2004). *Options for Increasing Social Accountability in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: DFID and World Bank).
- Clamor, Ana Maria (2000). *To Struggle for an Idea: An Advocacy Training Manual for Cambodians*, Phnom Penh: NGO Forum on Cambodia. [www.ngoforum.org.kh/Core/Advocacy%20Training%20Manual.pdf](http://www.ngoforum.org.kh/Core/Advocacy%20Training%20Manual.pdf)
- Committee for Free and Fair Election in Cambodia (COMFREL) website: [www.comfrel.org](http://www.comfrel.org)
- Commune Council Support Project (CCSP) website: <http://www.ccspcambodia.org>
- Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC) website: <http://www.ccc-cambodia.org>
- Ebihara, May (1968). 'Svay, a Khmer Village in Cambodia,' PhD. Dissertation (Department of Anthropology, Columbia University: NY). Chandler, David (2003), *A History of Cambodia*. Chiang Mai: Silkwork Books.
- Hanks, Lucien (1962). "Merit and power in the Thai Social Order." *American Anthropologist* 64: 1247-1261.
- Hughes, Caroline and Kheang, Un, *Cambodia Governance Analysis* (Unpublished draft).
- Joakim, Ojendal (2005). "A New Local State in Cambodia? Decentralization as a Political Commodity", In Francis Wah Kok Loh & Joakim Ojendal (eds.), *Southeast Asian Responses to Globalization: Restructuring Governance and Deepening Democracy*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Kim, Sedara & Joakim Ojendal (2007). *Where Decentralization Meets Democracy: Civil Society, Local Government, and Accountability in Cambodia*, Working Paper No 35. Phnom Penh: CDRI.
- Kim, Sedara (2001). *Reciprocity: Informal Patterns of Interaction in a village near Angkor Park*, M.A Thesis, Department of Anthropology, Northern Illinois University, Dekalb, Illinois.
- Kim, Sedara (2009). *Democracy in Action: Decentralization Reforms in Post Conflict Cambodia*, PhD Dissertation, School of Global Studies, Goteborg University, Sweden. (Draft)
- Law on Administrative Management of Capital City, Province, Cities, District, and Khan, RGC 2008.
- Malena, Carmen et al (2008). *Linking Citizens and the State: An Assessment of Civil Society Contributions to good governance in Cambodia*. Center for Advanced Study/ World Bank, Phnom Penh.

Mansfield, Cristina & MacLeod, Curt (2004). *Commune Councils and Civil Society: Promoting Decentralization Through Partnerships*, Phnom Penh: PACT.

Ninh, Kim and Henke, Roger (2005). *Commune Council in Cambodia: A National Survey on their Functions and Performance, with a Special Focus on Conflict Resolution*. Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Center for Advanced Study and The Asia Foundation.

Ojendal, Joakim (2003). *Ten Years of Reconstruction and Reconciliation: What it May Mean in Cambodia?* Working Paper No. 6, Department of Peace and Development Research. Sweden: Goteborg University.

Ottaway, Marina (2002). *Rebuilding State Institutions in Collapsed States. Development and Change* 33(5): 1001-1023.

Ojendal, Joakim and Kim, Sedara (2008). *Local Democracy as a Strategy for State Reconstruction: Decentralization and Participation in Cambodia*. In Joakim Ojendal and Mona Lilja 2008, "Beyond Democracy of Cambodia: Post conflict Reconstruction", NIAS Press.

Pak, Kimchoeun et al (2007). *Accountability and Neo-Patrimonialism in Cambodia: A Critical Literature Review*, Working Paper No. 34. Phnom Penh: CDRI.

Paris, Roland (2005). *Towards More Effective Peace Building*, In Menocal Alina and Kilpatrick, Kate (eds.), *Development in Practice* 6(15): 767-777.

Prum, Sokha (2005). "Decentralization and Poverty Reduction in Cambodia",

*Regional Development Dialogue*, 26(2): 114-120.

Rusten, Caroline et al (2004). *The Challenges of Decentralization Design in Cambodia*, Monograph No. 1. Phnom Penh: CDRI.

Royal Government of Cambodia (2005). *Strategic Framework for Decentralization and De-Concentration Reforms*.

Royal Government of Cambodia (2004). *Rectangular Strategy*.

The World Bank (2008). Newsletter 6(1): p. 3.

Thion, Serge (1993). *Watching Cambodia* (White Lotus).

White, Gordon (1994). "Civil society, Democratization and Development: Clearing the Analytical Ground" *Democratization*, 1 (Autumn) p. 379.

Un, Kheang (2005). 'Democratization Without Consolidation: The Case of Cambodia, 1993-2004,' PhD Dissertation. Dekalb Illinois: Department of Political Science, Northern Illinois University.

Kim, Sedara & Ann, Sovatha (2005). *Can Civil Society Enhance Local Government's Accountability in Cambodia?* ADR/CDRI, 9(3) p. 5.

2008 LAAR Survey of Citizen and Councilor Perceptions of Commune Councils. Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Center for Advanced Study and PACT.



# ANNEX

## Thoughts on Public Service Accountability

---

Highlights of Focus Group Discussions With  
Government and Citizen Groups in Cambodia

February 2009

# BACKGROUND

In February 2009, the Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in East Asia and the Pacific (ANSA-EAP), a regional project currently hosted by the Ateneo School of Government, a unit of the Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines, organized several focus group discussions (FGDs) in Phnom Penh. The objective of the FGDs was to probe into beliefs, concepts, attitudes, and perceptions about social accountability (SAC) as an approach to good governance among Cambodian government workers and citizen groups. Findings of the FGD were intended to help frame SAC messages and themes

for networking, capacity building, and advocacy activities.

ANSA-EAP commissioned the Cambodian NGO, SILAKA, to provide logistical support and facilitate the FGDs, which were conducted in the Khmer language. Four FGDs were conducted 5-6 February 2009 at the SILAKA training room in Phnom Penh. Main facilitator was Ms. Hong Sovanny of SILAKA, who also drafted this report. She was assisted by Mr. Sey Visoth, Mr. Yem Makara, and Leng Samuth. Mr. J. Ibarra Angeles of ANSA-EAP served as resource person.

## FGD PARTICIPANTS

**P**articipants came from two general sectors: private citizens, and public officials. Participants were recruited from areas in and around Phnom Penh. Two sessions for each sector were conducted, one with women and another one with men.

The majority of participants were recruited by direct contact through SILAKA's available network of non-government organizations (NGOs) and government channels. In total, five government ministries including the Ministry of Job and Vocational Training,

Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Women's Affair, and Councils of Ministers participated.

A total of 32 participants participated. There were 15 participants from government, of which 7 were women. There were 17 from the citizen sector, of which 6 were women. Participants were between the ages of 22 and 60. The following table provides the sector, gender, date, and number of participants.

Sector	Gender	FGD Date	No. # of Participants
Citizen Group	Male	(AM) 5 Feb 2009	8
	Female	(PM) 5 Feb 2009	7
Government	Male	(AM) 6 Feb 2009	11
	Female	(PM) 6 Feb 2009	6



# PREPARATION FOR THE FGDS

**P**rior to conducting the FGDS, the ANSA-EAP resource person visited several offsite locations including Kandal, Takeo, Kampong Chhnang Provinces and Phnom Penh Municipality to document examples of public services available. Several hundred photos were taken of images representing the themes of health, education, infrastructure, and sanitation services. Of the photos, four were selected as visual pegs during the preliminary “warm-up” discussion that began each FGD session. The photos included a public dental clinic, public school classroom, road construction site, and garbage collection.

As part of its technical assistance ANSA-EAP also prepared separate semi-structured questionnaires to guide the discussions, one for governmental officials and another for the citizen group participants. SILAKA translated the guide into Khmer. ANSA-EAP pretested the discussion guide with a group of SILAKA staff members, resulting in a revision and streamlining of the questionnaire. Prior to the actual FGDS, ANSA-EAP conducted an orientation of the SILAKA team on how to use the guide. This discussion guide is found as an attachment of this paper.

# METHOD AND PROCEDURE

**E**ach FGD session began with an overview of the FGD objectives in order to familiarize participants with the process and to solicit their expectations. The facilitator emphasized that participation in the FGD was voluntary and that the names of participants would remain confidential.

All participants were encouraged to express their ideas and feelings, to be open, and to actively participate and share their opinions without fear of censure.

Following this overview, the facilitator began the discussion using the

structured FGD guide, which was divided into eight sections:

- Public Service Delivery
- Citizen Participation
- Establishing and Enhancing Social Accountability Implementation
- Habit, Culture and Value
- Rights to Information
- Practicing and Supporting Social Accountability
- Practitioner Communities of Social Accountability and Advocacy
- Using Knowledge, Skill and Experience of Social Accountability.

# HIGHLIGHTS OF FGD FINDINGS

## **O**n Public Service Delivery

When asked to express their thoughts and opinions about the state of public services in Cambodia, most participants agreed that majority of services at the community level is now available as compared to before; however they are still not of quality. Participants said there is still need to improve public services.

In particular, one female public official said that public services in Cambodia have not improved enough. She pointed especially to the stench that comes from the abundance of trash along the streets and added that sanitation workers are not equipped with the proper uniforms (such as work boots, gloves, and masks) to safeguard them from the dangers.

A participant from the citizen groups acknowledged the government's good efforts at building schools and ensuring teachers with enough books. But he pointed out that it still was not enough.

This topic apparently struck a common sentiment among both private citizens and public officials. There was a man

who became exceedingly emotional as he expressed his frustration about the limited and poor quality of services available. He added that the services did not respond to all the needs of the people. He said it is necessary to involve the participation of citizens by offering resources such as materials, budget, moral support, and feedback to the government.

## **O**n Citizen Participation

Most of the participants agreed that it is crucial for private citizens to participate in the implementation of public services both physically by getting involved in the review of budgets, materials, and labor force and non-physically through contribution of ideas, opinions, feedback and monitoring. However, participants did not agree on how and to what degree citizens should participate.

Generally, citizen participation in public services is seen as a challenge because of the lack of basic knowledge of the process. The idea is simply too overwhelming for the average citizen. One of the men in the citizen's group expressed this opinion:

“As a citizen, seeing the bad public services, we should have the rights to express opinion, evaluate, to improve the situation. We need to participate in the monitoring group to give feedback to government that the services are not yet proper or better.”

Participants felt they need a law to secure their right to information on how to participate and express their ideas for improving public services. They also felt they did not know how to vocally demand from the government to express their needs.

A government official suggested that those with complaints should make use of positive and constructive words to get sympathy and good response instead of giving negative feedback or comment. The official also felt that people should fulfill their roles in participation with their government counterparts by contributing more. He continued by saying,

“People could give positive and constructive criticism, but should refrain from solely blaming the government. This is unacceptable. Instead, what they should do whatever it takes to get the government to take pity on them in order to get their needs met.”

He added that in recent years, there was unanticipated rapid growth and abundance in material goods, and society has a new dilemma, one of having to educate the consumer about ethics and morality in order to learn how to cope. People’s

attitudes are difficult; some are flexible while others are hard to change--even those with PhD degrees. And they (private citizens) should not wait for change to come their way; they themselves have to ask for change. He compared it to a local Khmer saying that “If a child does not cry, its mother will not breastfeed it.”

Government groups see participation mainly in terms of citizens contributing labor or money. On the other hand, citizen groups see participation in terms of having their opinions heard and in becoming involved in policy formulation and implementation.

Participants remembered the “good old days” when people participated in civic action. Before, most roads were constructed by the people themselves. They contributed their labor and time. But this is no longer the case now. “People are not helping each other like before because they do not have good relationship with each other. So to get people to help government we need to introduce the notion of love for one another, good morality and ethical value, honesty and transparency.”

### **On Establishing and Enhancing Social Accountability Action**

Overall, all the FGD participants had a good understanding of public service and framed “social accountability” in that context. There was a clear difficulty in understanding the phrase “social accountability”. They tended to label it “public service accountability”.

All groups were in consensus that citizen participation in improving public services

is very good and essential, because it gives the government and communities an insight into the public demands/needs and the areas where public services need to be improved. They should be held in an open forum allowing all citizens an opportunity to take part and contribute.

Some thought that it would be more effective if citizen groups/networks were formed to provide a platform for the sharing of information and opportunity to voice opinions on public service activities. In addition, these groups would provide support, offer feedback (constructive criticism), and monitoring of services in order to assist the government with improving public services.

To improve the situation, a female official recommended that independent expert and inter-ministries committees should be established with citizen representatives serving as monitors of public service implementation.

Both male and females from the citizen groups and the government group noted that establishing these activities are impractical without citizen participation. This means that the government and the citizen groups need to take ownership and commit to reform of the country, but added that this cannot be facilitated without a common principle and willingness to take the steps forward to achieve the reform.

A woman from the citizen groups sympathetically added that private citizens must participate because sometimes the government might not be aware of the bad quality of public services.

## On Habit, Culture, and Values

Cambodia has a history of citizen participation notably during the Sangkumrah Niyom (Sihanouk Regime) when most roads were constructed by people's participation workforces. For example, the road from Takmao to Kampong Kantout town, which is over 10 kilometers long, was built completely by citizen participation in development.

Another woman added that the concept of citizen participation during Sangkumrah Niyom included them hearing the word "National Congress which was offered as an opportunity for us to criticize government agencies on the implementation of institutions and government officials so that they would improve their performance."

Social frameworks in Cambodia reflect Khmer responses to a wide range of historical experiences including earlier models of wealth and power followed by periods of extreme hardship, wars, civil unrest, occupations and extreme communism. In particular, this occurred during the Pol Pot Regime. Under Pol Pot, the social fabric of Khmer society collapsed with a complete destruction of the infrastructure with the abolition of wealth, the dissolution of private property ownership, and eradication of the educated and skilled population leaving the unskilled to tend to the young, sick, and elderly.

During that time, it would have been too daring to give citizens the right to make "criticism" of government. They even use

the proverb, saying: “Those who dare will have their skin torn!” (*Neak hean sbek dach*).

Since then, Cambodia has made some stride toward rehabilitating Khmer society. However, social relationships can be seen in the hierarchical power structures, gender understandings and religious beliefs that direct people’s everyday lives. Cambodia’s modern culture has seen a trend in consumer materialism. Without the proper infrastructures in place and no professional ethics standard in practice there has been a deterioration of moral and spiritual values leading to a decline in people’s participation in reform of public services.

### On the Right to Information

The majority of participants believed that each person is entitled to equal rights to live, to work, and right to information. They agreed that without access to information, people are not only uninformed, but do not have vital information to gain access to public services that could be beneficial to their health and well-being.

On the same note, some thought that the measurement of service quality cannot be accessed without monitoring and feedback from the public. Also cited were concerns about the creation of support mechanisms and policies to protect people from intimidation. Freedom of expression is required to ensure and improve citizen participation.

A woman from the citizen group eagerly expressed her desire to see the passage

of a “Right to Information Law” now and emotionally suggested that the government should create a law to protect the people’s rights to express opinions and to expand information dissemination networks to educate people about their rights. Advocacy to pass such an information law is a tool to support and protect people. It will be a main factor in promoting social accountability implementation.

In all FGD sessions, participants agreed that:

- Laws need to be established to protect the rights of people to participate and enforce better law implementation;
- Better cooperative partnerships between government and citizen groups need to be established to foster communication;
- People need to be educated on how to demand and communicate their needs to government;
- Both government officials and people need to be educated on ethics and morality.

### On Practicing and Supporting Social Accountability

The practice of social accountability as a method to achieve good governance requires participation from the people, and in order to facilitate participation, the dissemination of information needs to be widely publicized and enforced by laws created to protect rights to information.

A male government officer stressed that citizen participation is crucial in law making, implementation, and monitoring especially regarding the national constitution. All events in Cambodia have to be monitored but in many of these events, the room of citizen participation is narrow. For some, even though there is participation, it is just symbolic [token] and does not extend to participation in decision making. He added that projects, activities and programs in strategic plans require participation from multiple points of view and this participation can only from real government-citizen partnerships. But participation must come first; without it no partnership would last long.

Most participants support the creation of a right to information law because it would promote progress of project implementation. They believe it will allow people to work together well. However, difficulties were cited in receiving information from project implementers, because as a participant from the citizen's group explained, it is hard to receive information because the project implementers are not willing to release it.

A government official man unrelentingly added that people should consider assisting the government in reforming mechanisms to oversee the monitoring of implementation of laws. It is also necessary to provide opportunity for civil society, citizen, donors, and other stakeholders to give feedback, because public service information is instrumental for use in reflection, implementation and improvement of services.

Some of the participants from the government group responded by saying that the State has disseminated information, but the people themselves do not want to see it because they are too poor and have no time to participate in attending the meeting. They are very busy struggling to make a living. And most people no longer want to know and hear what they consider to be government propaganda. They do not care about the release of information about public services. Even though an abundance of information has been disseminated, they feel they have no further use for it. Notably, one male government official used the analogy of a cake in their hands: they [government] do not want to share with [the people], so [the people] are hungry and have to demand to get [their share].

A man from the citizen group firmly expressed that citizens and youth have the obligation and responsibility to help improve their local community. Sometimes, they may think that they have no ability to do anything, but it is because they lack the courage to express their ideas. Finally, he added that mechanisms should be made for project implementers to release information widely. Government and independent institutions have to educate people by reinforcing their understanding about the importance of participation and fostering the formation of groups to give feedback to project implementers.

During the discussions a crucial question was raised. Why has morality weakened? The reason is mostly attributed to rise in materialism taking over of the value of critical thinking. Some of the participants

felt the importance of the ability of the younger generation to ask questions as a means to gain access to critical information. If we do not empower them, they will rebel and what are we going to do with our future?

### **On Practitioner Communities of Social Accountability and Advocacy**

In practicing social accountability, participation has to be multilateral in order to be effective, because unilateral participation from either the community or national levels is not sufficient to ensure sustainability of good governance. Collaboration by both levels would enable the effectiveness of networks and allow them to participate in and be a part of international network communities. Once an active member, we would gain international recognition and support which would facilitate demands or provide a platform to give feedback to government.

A few participants from the citizen groups enthusiastically stressed the importance of participating internationally, because local participation can only be recognized nationally whereas international participation would enable Cambodia to interact, contribute, and share information and lessons learned from the region and global partners.

Other participants were emotional. In particular, a woman from the citizen group emphasized that collaboration would extend citizen voice on policy development and implementation, thereby strengthening peoples' influence on the government and project implementers. By

giving feedback, citizen participation will allow them to communicate unmet needs of the communities, define deficiencies in public services, and help the government by giving insight into how to improve public services.

Men from the citizen group stressed the importance of "number is strengths" in working with government. The women were more practical, preferring to focus on skills in getting information in order to do advocacy.

### **On Using Knowledge, Skills and Experiences of Social Accountability**

Implementing social accountability is a complex and dynamic process that can only be effective when government officials and private citizens are knowledgeable about their civic responsibility to actively participate and fulfill their citizenship role. Before this can be achieved, an understanding and knowledge of civic institutions, the acquisition of skills, and willingness are required by citizens to actively participate in society. Specifically, they need knowledge of the political and legal systems and processes that supports them.

A few participants were optimistic. This included a male official who cited the NGOs' responsibility to build the capacities of their communities through education. This education strengthens understanding and teaches why citizens need a sense of personal identity within their own communities and how they can contribute to local, national, and global communities.



Some felt that it would be useful for citizens as well as government officials to be given an opportunity to learn skills in such areas as communication, advocacy, presentation-making, and baseline data collection.

Others wanted to include moral training citing that people especially leaders should be obligated to have professional ethics. Without an ethical standard, laws cannot be implemented or enforced. Furthermore, people need to understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens. These include principles of decision-making, representative and accountable government, freedom of speech, equality

before the law, social justice, and equality.

This process would facilitate the practice of citizenship skills, the exploration and development of values and dispositions to support citizenship and the empowerment of informed decision-making. In particular, a female from the citizen group felt that without skills like communication, which are essential in negotiating and advocating, citizen groups cannot succeed in getting the government to respond to their needs.

# CONCLUSION

Overall, the participants were pleased with the opportunity given by the FGDs to converse and throughout the proceedings they responded actively and openly without fear or intimidation. Clustering the FGD sessions by gender and sector gave them the leeway to be brave in expressing opinion and in not interrupting each other.

However, the tone of one of the government groups was clearly dominated by the comments and opinions of an elder senior officer who seemed knowledgeable on the topic of social accountability. The consensus among the majority of the group appeared to be in line with his comments. The elder senior officer contributed much more adamantly than the rest of the group participants, leaving others with less opportunity to express their opinions, especially the junior officers who got an opportunity to contribute only during the wrap up session.

There was less discussion when shown a visual peg, particularly Photo 2, which depicted a public school classroom.

The participants said that they found it hard to articulate their opinion, because the picture showed no action.

Men expressed their opinion in general, referring to general understanding of rules in life and in society, whereas women referred to specific activities that they experienced in the community (more practical situation in term of services that have actually taken place in their daily lives.) With regard to commenting on government services -- "criticism" of government projects and activities -- both men and women seemed to think that criticism was not generally welcomed by government. The men think that criticism would bring negative or retaliatory responses. The men seemed to think that it would be better to try to arouse sympathy from the government to get services, rather than offer "criticism" that might upset the government.

The majority of women felt that services have to improve a lot now than before, including wider roads, more focus by schools on students, hospitals, dental

services, and trash collection. They felt that those services have yet to be effective. They are not of good quality and they should be changed.

They also agreed that the people have a big role to contribute to good services. They felt that the weak implementation of the law is the main reason for not getting good services from the government. Teaching people to carry out their role is key to get law and order. They see that government is weak in implementing the law, e.g., wearing a helmet while riding a motorcycle; only 70% comply and the rest get away without wearing a helmet.

Men tended to rely on traditional expectations on how to get things done and seemed to think that good morality and ethics would be needed to improve the services to the people. They could only articulate on the primary data and on the consolidated data that can be collected from different places and relied on news from government newsletters

and advertisement whereas women put more emphasis on how to get information. Women felt that appealing to their reason and their knowledge, and not to their sympathy is the key to getting better services.

Women government officials agreed that one must have good role models before doing anything else. Government has spoken a lot over TV and radio, and have issued a lot of appeals asking for people to participate. The women said people must give feedback to government because government officials still do not know that things are not yet good. But people do not know exactly who to send their complaints to when they experience problems. They also believe that strength comes in number, especially if they want to reach the top official. They are willing to network at the regional and international level as well so they can learn best practices from other countries.

## CAMBODIA FGD DISCUSSION GUIDE – CITIZEN GROUP

## INTRO

TOPIC	DISCUSSION/TRANSITIONS
1a. Introduction	<i>Moderator's and documentor's names. Also, names of observers, if any. Then ask participants to introduce themselves very briefly.</i>
2a. Topic of interview.	We would like to talk to you today about how citizens can work with government to improve the delivery of public services.
3a. No right or wrong answers.  Your opinions.	There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions—this is not a test.  We would just like to know about your experiences and opinions.
4a. Length of discussion.	Our discussion will take about 1 hour.
5a. Talking to one another.	As we will be discussing many things about ourselves, it's important that we not all talk at once because we will want to hear each other. Also, if someone wants to speak, please raise your hand first and wait for me to call you.
6a. Explain note-taking and tape recorder.  Confidentiality.	_____ (documentor's name) will be writing down some of the things we talk about so we can remember them later. Also, we would like to use a tape recorder. Does anyone object?  We won't use your names in any reports.
7a. Check understanding. Clarification if needed	Any questions? Is there anything you want me to clarify?

### FGD PROPER – CITIZEN GROUP

TOPIC	MODERATOR	PROBES
8a. Personalize the mental image of public service delivery. Give participants a visual peg	Let's start. I'd like to show you some pictures. Then I'll ask you some questions about them.	
	<i>Photo: health clinic or out-reach health center.</i>	Show photos one by one, then line them up together as they are shown.  - What's happening in the picture?  - What's your opinion of the kind of [public service] you're getting in your community as shown in the photos?
	<i>Photo: Inside a public school classroom or shot of a government school with students.</i>	
	<i>Photo: Construction project, such as road or bridge building.</i>	
	<i>Photo: Garbage truck, making house-to-house collections.</i>	
	Is there anything else you'd like to say about these photos?	
9a. Citizen participation	What do you think citizens can do to improve public services?	

**FGD PROPER – CITIZEN GROUP**

TOPIC	MODERATOR	PROBES
	In many countries in the world, ordinary citizens closely check how government agencies are delivering public services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Can you tell us if you've experienced this in your community?</li> <li>- What would you call this kind of activity by citizens? (Note: some might answer, "voting".) (Probe their use of specific action words (e.g., checking, monitoring, watchdogging, guarding, etc.))</li> <li>- Is it a good or a bad thing when citizens do this? Please explain.</li> </ul>
10a. Enhancing and institutionalizing SA practice	Some of you said this is a good thing. What can you suggest so that citizens can continue doing this?	- What do you think should be done so that citizens can become more effective in doing this?
	Some of you said this is <u>not</u> a good thing. What other kind of activity can you suggest?	- Do you think it's dangerous or foolish for citizens to do this?
11a. Cultural norms and values	What kind of connection do you see between this activity and your cultural beliefs and values? Please explain.	If necessary, probe if they think it's a Western concept.
12a. Right to information	People who do this activity usually ask for information about government programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What kind of information should citizens have about public services?</li> <li>- How much information should citizens have?</li> </ul>

### FGD PROPER – CITIZEN GROUP

TOPIC	MODERATOR	PROBES
	Do citizens have a right to get this information?	Probe: their suggestions on how to make sure this right is assured.
	How should citizens make use of this information?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To make suggestions only?</li> <li>- To point out weaknesses and defects in programs?</li> <li>- To release to the news media or by Internet?</li> <li>- To “bring down public officials”?</li> <li>-if people ask information or give feedback to govt agency to improve public services, is it good or bad?</li> </ul>
13a. Community of SA practitioners and advocates	<i>Would it be beneficial to you to become a member of a community of people and groups in East Asia who practice and promote this kind of activity?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Why or why not?</li> </ul> <p>Do you know people in other country working for Public Service Reliability?</p> <p>What benefits do people get when they monitor expense/ public service of government?</p>
14a. SA experience, knowledge, and expertise	<i>What know-how and information would be very helpful to people who want to do this activity?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How can others benefit from your own experiences, knowledge and expertise?</li> <li>- How about from the government side: what can we learn from them to help in this activity?</li> </ul>
15a. Wrap-up	Is there anything else that you’d like to share with us?	
	Thank you and good day!	

The Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in East Asia and the Pacific (ANSA-EAP) is a networking facility for networks promoting the “social accountability” approach to good governance. It provides capacity building through a learning-in-action approach and serves as an information gateway on social accountability tales, tools and techniques.

Social accountability is the process of constructive engagement between citizens and government in monitoring how government agencies and their officials, politicians, and service providers use public resources to deliver services, improve community welfare, and protect people’s rights.

The social accountability approach needs four basic conditions to work: a) organized, capable citizen groups; b) responsive government; c) context and cultural appropriateness; and d) access to information.

ANSA-EAP operates in a large and diverse region. It pursues a geographic strategy that currently puts priority on support and technical assistance to social accountability activities in Cambodia, Indonesia, Mongolia, and the Philippines. It also follows a thematic and sector strategy by supporting mainly local social accountability efforts that deal with service delivery (education, health, local infrastructure), procurement monitoring, the youth, extractive industries, and climate change.



Pacifico Ortiz Hall, Fr. Arrupe Road  
Ateneo de Manila University  
Loyola Heights, Katipunan Avenue  
Quezon City 1108, Philippines  
Telephone: (632) 426 6062  
E-mail: [ansa\\_eap@yahoo.com](mailto:ansa_eap@yahoo.com)  
Website: [www.ansa-eap.net](http://www.ansa-eap.net)



ANSA-EAP is currently hosted by  
Ateneo School of Government,  
Ateneo de Manila University.