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# **SUB-NATIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY IN CAMBODIA: A GRAMSCIAN PERSPECTIVE**

OU Sivhuoch

Working Paper Series No. 84

October 2013

A CDRI Publication



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ISBN-10: 978-99950-52-81-2

**Sub-National Civil Society in Cambodia: A Gramscian Perspective**

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*Responsibility for the ideas, facts and opinions presented in this research paper rests solely with the author. His opinions and interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views of the Cambodia Development Resource Institute.*

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Layout: OUM Chantha

Printed and bound in Cambodia by Sun Heang Printing, Phnom Penh

## Table of Contents

Acronyms.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Abstract.....	vi
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Gramscian Civil Society vs Mainstream Approach.....	1
3. Methodology and Scope .....	3
4. Sub-National Civil Society in Cambodia.....	4
5. Findings.....	5
5.1. The Sub-National State's Hegemonic Project.....	5
5.2. Has Sub-National Civil Society Compromised Its Autonomy? .....	7
5.3. Resistance from Within.....	8
6. Gramscian Sub-National Civil Society in Perspective .....	9
7. Gramscian Civil Society and Embedded Advocacy: A New Model in the Making? .....	10
8. Conclusion .....	10
References.....	11
Appendices.....	14
Appendix 1. CBOs Adopted by Various Support Agencies .....	14
Appendix 2. Types of Farmer Organisations, as Adopted by Couturier.....	14
CDRI Working Paper Series.....	16

## **Acronyms**

CBO	Community-Based Organisation
CDRI	Cambodia Development Resource Institute
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
VDC	Village Development Committee

## **Acknowledgements**

The author thanks the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency for funding this study and his trip to the University of Oxford, where the paper was presented on 9-10 March 2013 at the Southeast Asia Studies Symposium. I also extend my thanks to the symposium conveners Dr Hart Feuer and Dr Gabi Waibel, senior researchers at the Center for Development Research at the University of Bonn, Germany, and other symposium participants, who gave me valuable comments.

The author is deeply grateful for the invaluable cooperation of and data from the informants—staff of non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations located in Phnom Penh, Battambang, Kompong Speu, Takeo and Kampot.

The author acknowledges that some of data used in the study was gathered with colleagues Dr Sedara Kim and Mr Pide Lun, who were involved in previous research projects. My thanks also go to Dr Rebecca F. Catalla, research adviser, for her practical comments on the work.

The author is grateful for the support and interest of the CDRI executive director, Mr Larry Strange, research director, Dr Srinivasa Madhur, director of research, Mr Sirn Lee Ung, director of operations and Mr Sreang Chheat, coordinator of the Democratic Governance and Public Sector Reform Programme.

Thanks are also due to many staff (especially Ms Nareth Chhoun and Ms Navy Hort) at CDRI, who provided essential logistical and administrative support throughout the research.

## Abstract

Several authors (particularly Laundau 2008; Henke 2011) label Cambodian national civil society as a sphere that is neither apolitical nor autonomous, but influenced or co-opted by and blurred with the state. They posit that a Gramscian perspective is relevant to interpreting civil society in the country. This article suggests that the application of a Gramscian perspective also proves relevant to sub-national civil society in Cambodia. The sub-national state has recently politicised and co-opted village development committees and imposed restrictions on civil society, and the latter has compromised its autonomy, and memberships have blurred as the state joined in. Also relevant is civil society's insistence on and ability to retain its independence and achieve its objectives, leaving the sub-national state's hegemonic project incomplete, as Gramsci argued. Even so, Gramsci's concept does not apply to some cases where the sub-national state and civil society could cooperate on a win-win basis. The sub-national state's behaviour is rather heterogeneous, permitting space for some civil society groups to operate more freely in some locations and at some levels (especially the commune and village tiers). Beyond the findings, the research proposes that perhaps it is time for sub-national civil society to redefine itself from being completely "autonomous" (as characterised by the liberal perspective) from the state yet engaged with it, to working to instigate change from within.

**Key Words:** Cambodia, civil society, Gramsci, NGO, CBO, autonomy, hegemony



## 1. Introduction

Ramasamy (2004) proposes that examining civil society in Asia from the Gramscian perspective would make a path for understanding those aspects of civil society overlooked by liberal views. While liberal theories tend to regard civil society as “autonomous” from the state,<sup>1</sup> Gramsci noted that it was a “terrain of contestation between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces” (Gramsci 1975). Laundau (2008), following Ramasamy, suggests that Gramscian civil society could prove relevant for interpreting Cambodian national civil society, though she notes a few limits to the approach. Henke (2011) found the Gramscian conception of civil society useful for unpacking Cambodian civil society broadly as well. Yet no attempt has been made to study sub-national civil society in Cambodia from this viewpoint, a gap this research intends to fill. Specifically, the paper asks the question: To what degree does the Gramscian framework of civil society prove relevant in understanding the recent development of sub-national civil society in Cambodia?

The paper starts by conceptually illuminating the Gramscian view of civil society and contrasting it with liberal views. Next it discusses the empirical side of sub-national civil society, with the focus on matching characteristics falling into the conceptual framework. Then the paper examines the relevance of the Gramscian perspective to grasping the unfolding dynamics of sub-national civil society. That is followed by a discussion of whether such a conception enables or impedes sub-national state-civil society engagement, especially in the long-term outlook and the context of Cambodia’s dominant state.

## 2. Gramscian Civil Society vs Mainstream Approach

The inherent ambiguity of civil society makes it a difficult concept to apply; it is often embedded with contradictions and various meanings (Khilnani 2001). The understanding of civil society has become more sophisticated as the concept has travelled to the global South, where the context differs from that of the land of its origin. Since the 1980s, when neoliberalism dominated the development paradigm, a liberal perspective has influenced civil society conceptualisation. The concept is broadly viewed as “the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules” (Diamond 1994: 228). Similarly, Weiler (2005: 5) posited that “the idea that NGOs should represent society to the state, from a position of independence, characterizes much of the literature on civil society”. In the same vein, White defined 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” (White 1994: 337-338). Importantly, “the strength of civil society is measured by the peaceful coexistence of these units and by their collective capacity to simultaneously resist subordination to the state and demand inclusion into national political structures” (Oxhorn 1995: 251–2).

Civil society is conceptualised in the liberal view by its dichotomy or structural autonomy from the state (Laundau 2008). The idea is accompanied by the liberal arguments for promoting civil liberties of individuals and checking state power (Bui 2013). Also it defines “state-civil society relations as complementary, cooperative, and in partnership” (Bui 2013: 78).

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<sup>1</sup> While the terms state and government are the not the same and have different connotations, in this article they are used interchangeably to mean an entity that is legitimate and may dominate or collaborate with civil society.

The application of liberal civil society in Asia has proved more limited than generally assumed (Bui 2013; Quadir and Lele 2004). Recognising the trend, some scholars have already started to examine civil society from the Gramscian perspective as an alternative to the liberal one (Chong 2006; Henke 2011; Hilley 2001; Laundau 2008; Rodan 1996, 1997).

Broadly liberal and Marxist theorists including Gramsci refer to civil society as “... the public space between large-scale bureaucratic structures of state and economy on the one hand, and the private sphere of family, friendships, personality, and intimacy on the other” (Adamson 1987: 320). However, Gramsci’s arguments differ from the liberal conception and have demonstrated relevance in many countries across Asia in the following major areas (Bui 2013; Laundau 2008; Ramasamy 2004).

First, Gramsci viewed the sphere of civil society as an important space where the state influences society and builds *hegemony* by manufacturing cultural and ideological consent (Femia 1981: 31-5); via this control mechanism, the state asserts its political legitimacy (Bui 2013). The Gramscian notion of civil society is termed a conflictual approach.

Second, Gramsci, understanding civil society as a sphere where the state is engaged in struggle with other actors for domination, questioned the autonomy of civil society from the state and made the point that civil society is an arena of contestation “where ideas, thoughts, ideologies, and political principles are contested and debated” (Ramasamy 2004: 206). The contestation occurs between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces (Gramsci 1975). Thus an important and visible difference between Gramsci’s concept of civil society and others is the degree of “autonomy” it enjoys from the state.

Third, according to Gramsci, while the state intends to dominate, its hegemonic project is never complete, and there are often counter-struggles from civil society (Ramasamy 2004). Civil society is always “an arena of constant competition, conflict and clash of ideas” (Ramasamy 2004: 29). Hence, civil society is a breeding ground or “a crucial site to undermine existing values and inculcate new ones” (Alagappa 2004: 29).

However, Gramsci’s conception of civil society does not stand without critiques. In his broad definition, Gramsci recognised that the state and civil society in practice are blurred and indistinguishable though they appear separable as defined above (Nielsen 1995: 43). Gramsci, therefore, provided a rather ambiguous definition of civil society and did not fully explain the nature and limits of civil society in relation to the state—its boundaries are unclear (Ehrenberg 1999: 209).

This paper adopts three crucial aspects of the Gramscian conception of civil society to examine the nature of sub-national civil society in Cambodia. It examines the degree to which the state has intended to shape civil society as a part of its hegemonic project. Then it investigates how autonomous or free civil society is from the state. Finally, it unpacks how civil society reacts to counter the state’s dominance. Moving beyond the three areas, it also looks into the limits of this approach.

### 3. Methodology and Scope

The article draws on a wide-ranging review of the literature on international and Cambodian civil society, NGOs and CBOs,<sup>2</sup> especially the latest research. The study builds on the author's previous research on civil society and NGOs in Cambodia. Earlier and ongoing work by the author touches on most aspects of national civil society and NGOs, whereas this paper moves to the sub-national arena, including the grassroots. It benefits from original field data collected from some 55 informants<sup>3</sup> in 2009, 2011, 2012 and early 2013. Further, as a local researcher who has lived in the field and observed civil society development for some years, the author hopes to have gained insight into sub-national civil society.

The paper examines two groups of sub-national civil society: development-oriented NGOs and CBOs. Currently there are 621 NGOs<sup>4</sup> operating at sub-national level (CCC 2013), 8000 village development committees (VDCs), considered modern CBOs, across 13,000 villages (World Bank 2009) and at least 13,017 farmer organisations<sup>5</sup> as of 2006 (Couturier *et al.* 2006). This study examines only these particular groups because their sheer numbers and funding<sup>6</sup> are considered to have significant impact on society and the state broadly. These groups engage largely in development activities and some advocacy work. The study excludes a minority<sup>7</sup> of NGOs and CBOs (as parts of the two groups above) that fiercely promote democracy and human rights and sometimes use tough tactics (such as mobilising local people to demonstrate) to pursue their objectives. These groups do not fall within the category of Gramscian civil society because they appear autonomous and thus not embedded in the state. Sub-national civil society in Cambodia also includes other traditional groups such as pot and pan associations and self-help groups, often linked to pagodas (Collins 1998; Ebihara 1968, 1974; Meas & McCallum 2009; World Bank 2009). These groups,<sup>8</sup> though observed commonly in villages and formed organically, represent only about 15 percent of villagers (World Bank 2009: 8). Beyond that, historical civil movements (especially around land conflicts) are not uncommon (Henke 2011; Yonekura 1999), but they lie outside the scope of the study as well.

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<sup>2</sup> Community-based organisations are difficult to define. For this study, a CBO is an organisation that emerges from and is run by local community representatives, responding to local needs. It has at least a minimal organisational structure and rudimentary ideas of membership (Kim & Öjendal 2007). Who initiates CBOs remains controversial. Some literature points out that there have been cases in which the ideas and social energy to set up CBOs originally surfaced from the local people, and NGOs supported them later (Sok 2013), while generally self-establishment is considered rare. CBOs are new in Cambodia and are largely initiated and supported by NGOs (Couturier *et al.* 2006; Theng *et al.* 2013). According to Couturier *et al.* (2006), of the 13,017 farmer organisations they found, more than 90 percent, were established after 1995 and 63 percent were formed after 2000. CBOs such as farmer water user communities, forestry communities, fishery communities, farmer associations and agricultural cooperatives are supposed to be permitted by the concerned state agencies, and they occasionally receive support from the government (Theng *et al.* 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Those include CBO staff (the majority), and national and provincial NGO representatives and two researchers who studied VDCs in the late 1990s and CBOs recently, respectively.

<sup>4</sup> Some provincial NGOs have several branches located in the provinces. Provincial NGOs stay closer to the beneficiaries than do those based solely in the capital.

<sup>5</sup> Generally, the definition of CBO this study has adopted captures what Couturier *et al.* (2006) refer to as farmer organisations. However, this study does not study all the five groups caught by that work: farming business communities and federations are excluded. See the appendices for details.

<sup>6</sup> In the five years to 2008, according to Chanboreth Ek and Hach Sok, Cambodia received around USD600 million per year, of which about 10 percent went to NGOs and CBOs (Ek & Sok (2008).

<sup>7</sup> Around 7 percent or less (World Bank (2009).

<sup>8</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that these traditional groups have also been influenced by the state, making them relevant to analysis from the Gramscian perspective. Nevertheless, given their small number and less significant political implications, they are not covered in the study.

#### 4. Sub-National Civil Society in Cambodia

Generally, civil society in Cambodia is considered weak (Henke 2011; Hughes 2009; Hughes and Conway 2003; UNDP 2010; Ou and Kim 2013a; Ou and Kim 2013b; SPM 2006). Earlier commentators documented the meagreness of civil society even prior to the civil war (in the 1960s and 1970s) (Ebihara 1974; Mabbett and Chandler 1996; Ovesen et al. 1996); after the war it was even worse (Hughes 2003; Hughes 2009). From the early 1990s, the international community, led by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, has put enormous resources and efforts into building civil society by supporting and strengthening NGOs; however, whether civil society has been strengthened over the past two decades is debatable (Ou and Kim 2013b). On a positive note, Öjendal (2013) classifies the evolution of Cambodian civil society into three stages. The first phase (from early to late 1990s) was almost all about money following NGOs: international ideas, interests and *modus operandi* dominated, and local civil society barely existed. The second phase (from late 1990s to mid-2000s), about NGOs having moved from the centre to the periphery (rural areas), was marked by more responsibilities being transferred from INGOs to local ones, with the latter's internal structure being stronger; both international and local NGOs started supporting local initiatives such as CBOs. In the third phase (from mid-2000s onwards), local CBOs have established a presence in every village, filling the gap previously filled by a few civil society actors. Those CBOs are often founded by local initiatives but financially supported by NGOs and local authorities; this is what Öjendal calls a hybrid phenomenon of sub-national civil society.<sup>9</sup>

Öjendal's analysis of Cambodia's evolving civil society tends to conclude that the sub-national state-civil society relationship is better bridged (Öjendal 2013), but remains unclear about the internal characteristics and nature of those civil society groups and how the state exercises power on the emerging sub-national civil society. Not one study has broached the question using Gramsci's approach. The discussion below is thematically organised as follows. First, it unpacks how the sub-national state has tended to co-opt civil society in different ways. Second, it shows how civil society at that level has compromised its autonomy to survive and be able to implement projects (with the state) to achieve its objectives. Third, it points to the agenda and *modus operandi* of sub-national civil society in accomplishing its mission by staying subordinate to the state while struggling to keep its autonomy from being encroached upon.

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<sup>9</sup> Ou and Kim (2013b) make the rather radical point that national NGOs do not constitute a civil society, but the illusion of it. There has not been a similar comprehensive and reliable assessment on the nature of sub-national NGOs, CBOs and other organisations supported by external stakeholders; hence, the paper takes Öjendal's argument. The terms NGO, CBO and civil society (groups) are used interchangeably throughout the paper. The author, however, distinguishes NGOs from CBOs: NGOs operate at provincial or district levels, while CBOs are base at the grass roots. They are similar in that they usually receive support from donors and are closer, more connected to and more accountable to the people than their national counterparts are. They differ in that CBO members and leaders come from the locality, and some work on a voluntary basis, while provincial and district NGOs are a bit distant and tend to work *for* the people, unlike CBOs, which work *with* the people.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. *The Sub-National State's Hegemonic Project*

The sub-national state (as a part of the overall weak state) is experiencing difficulty responding to citizens' demands; hence, broadly speaking, it welcomes partnering from civil society. Öjendal (2013) notes that sub-national government needs civil society more than civil society needs sub-national government. Even so, the authorities are cautious on many fronts and have been exercising various means to contain civil society activities (Öjendal & Kim 2012). Two actions are examples confirming this observation: the state's intention to control VDC development, and the state putting forward different requirements to delay the implementation of civil society activities.

The idea of VDCs arose when the UNDP started supporting Cambodia via CARERE.<sup>10</sup> One of the objectives of setting up VDCs in the early 1990s was to ensure that prioritisation of needs in planning started at the lowest level. Proposed action plans were submitted to the communes, and then UN agencies and NGOs could allocate resources for activities identified by VDCs. Up to early 2010, local citizens were democratically elected as VDC members, and there was general appreciation of VDCs' effectiveness from NGOs, such as Life with Dignity and Partnership for Development in Kampuchea, that worked closely with them. Things have changed; on 22 December 2010, the ministries of Interior and Rural Development issued a joint directive, stipulating:

VDCs are under the structure and authority of individual commune/sangkat councils ... and the structure of VDCs shall be composed of the village chief, deputy village chief, and village assistant ... Depending on each locality's needs and the requests of the village chief, commune/sangkat councils may appoint villagers to serve as members of VDC. (Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Rural Development 2010)

At the outset in the early 1990s, VDCs were not formally subordinate to the government. In the words of a research colleague assessing the earlier progress of VDCs, they were meant to be autonomous. To ensure that independence, those in authority, even the village chief, could serve only as advisers but not as chief or members (interview, 27 February 2013). Lately, since the directive has taken effect, civil society staff complain that they can no longer work with the VDCs they used to cooperate with because VDCs have become politicised. One informant complained:

VDCs have lost their legitimacy in the eyes of the villagers because the people no longer elect them. NGOs have no choice but to carry out activities with other groups such as savings groups, water user associations and village disaster committees ... Their new model of mainstreaming VDCs into the commune system requires NGOs to integrate their resources and projects into the commune investment plan. From the NGOs' side, this means objectives are not fully achieved because communes mostly work on hard infrastructure and do not empower the people. In addition, it's difficult to ensure transparency ... (Interview 26 February 2013)

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<sup>10</sup> The Cambodia Resettlement and Reintegration programmes were implemented in two phases: CARERE I, 1992-93, primarily dealt with the resettlement of refugees and internally displaced people; CARERE II, 1996-2001, pursued institutional and capacity development for public services delivery.



Judging from informants' answers, it is clear that sub-national government, under the direction of the central government, aims to limit the empowerment objectives of civil society, which are perceived to ignite people's understanding of their roles as rights holders. Further, the fact that VDCs have been integrated into the state system allows the state to have counter-forces against the activities promoted by civil society groups.

The second issue involves the sub-national government's caution and interference in the work of civil society. Various informants found the local authorities unwelcoming when they started new projects and activities involving a number of people. District authorities sometimes require groups to seek their permission and invite their attendance and even their personnel to speak.

We were undertaking an environment project. Before we could mobilise people to attend our training and dissemination, the authorities required us to get their permission, demanded they be present and sent a resource person from the Provincial Department of Land and Urban Planning. They used the pretext that we did not have a resource person who could explain and respond to the people. They were clearly suspicious of us and expected to limit our scope of training. (Interview, 27 February 2013)

Other informants had also experienced disruption from the local authorities. One provincial NGO leader made a similar point on how it discouraged the implementation of their projects:

Local government officials were difficult to deal with, at least in Banteay Meanchey and Oddar Meanchey. For example, they did not allow us to invite participants to join the training we conducted by raising one or more pretexts and so on and so forth. This is partly because democracy is considered a hot issue in Cambodia. (Interview, 21 March 2009)

Another provincial NGO director claimed that the nature of his organisation's development work requires cooperation; however, the organisation is often put in an uncomfortable situation because the provincial authorities sometimes take advantage.

After we had built a school, we invited the provincial governor to inaugurate the building. He came, but made a speech suggesting that the school was constructed by his political party or the government. (Interview, 2 April 2009)

He further stated that, although tangled in that particular challenge, the organisation continues to cooperate with the authorities. In short, the authorities stretch their prerogatives into civil society groups' territories knowing that the latter have no option but to tolerate their presence and might benefit from the intrusion. CBOs report similar happenings. One NGO staff member revealed an instance in which his NGO's field branches could not sustain the operations of the CBOs they had established because of the awkwardness of collaborating with local authorities.

Some CBOs failed because their work affected the benefits of some government officials; the government side does not provide a conducive environment. (Interview, 23 December 2011)

Others working closely in establishing and supporting CBOs felt the same way. One person complained:

The relationship with the authorities is unavoidable ... It seems that in the last six to seven years, local authorities do not listen or pay attention to NGOs like they used to in the 1990s. It is difficult for [our organisation] to do advocacy on judicial reform, which involves teaching people about legal affairs, because the local authorities are cautious and restrict our work in this area. (Interview, 6 October 2011)

Another interviewee, from a provincial NGO operating in 21 villages in three districts, perceived that the environment has become much tougher in the last seven years (Interview, 6 October 2011).

As another subtle form of state influence, a case was found during the fieldwork in Takeo in which a farmer organisation engaged in saving and rice production was approached by the Provincial Department of Agriculture, which persuaded the body to change its name and incorporate additional activities—in short to give the department a stake in the operation of the organisation. According to the organisation's chief, the department engaged the body because its performance stood out after close to a decade in action. In his words, "It's OK, because the new activities fit our agenda and mission, and we've got support [agricultural training] from the department and we still can work as usual" (interview, 25 April 2013). But it is well understood that the state, via the department, has extended its arm into the group and, in one way or another, the group has to respect the department's expectation of the organisation's safe zone of operation. The chief added, "... though it is good to have their cooperation and support, we could not say no to their request" (interview, 25 April 2013). Again, that implies force, not merely a request.

## **5.2. *Has Sub-National Civil Society Compromised Its Autonomy?***

Civil society's response to the recent unfriendly attitude from sub-national government has been less encouraging. Provincial and district NGOs seem to sense the intense and gradual state co-option, and some have already tried to align their work with the government's agenda. One provincial NGO advised:

The best way for NGOs to link to the government and be able to sustain their work is to be flexible and learn [what the authorities want]. Individual leaders must mind their behaviour and stay close to them. At the end of the day, things will ease up. (Interview, 6 October 2011)

"Learning what the authorities want", which was repeated by another informant on the same day, and "behaving oneself" imply that NGOs do not have much space to manoeuvre but must adjust to survive. Such an environment was commonly observed throughout the field visit to provinces, districts and communes.

The executive director of another NGO (working to empower CBOs and communities) recalled that it and others had adopted the slogan, "NGOs representing the people". Now they can no longer use the word "representing" and have replaced it with words about "bridging" or being "spokespersons":

NGOs now have stopped using the language of *representing* the people because there was pressure from the government that NGOs should not be too active while the people remain quiet. NGOs have shifted to adopting [roles as bridges or spokespersons for communities], raising their concerns and making requests to the government. (Interview, 23 December 2012)

The issues of membership or composition of CBOs more clearly affect their independence. Data from the field and various reports sufficiently confirm that local authorities have served as members or advisers and even leaders in some CBOs. While informants acknowledged the usefulness of their engagement, there were also complaints about intrusion by the state. One NGO rather neutrally picked out the advantages and disadvantages of the authorities' involvement:

Some members of the local authorities such as village chiefs, deputy village chiefs and commune councillors have become members of the CBOs we have established. There are pros and cons to this arrangement because even though we and our CBOs could benefit, as those officials have started to learn about and appreciate CBOs' work, they might be watchdogs. (Interview, 6 October 2011)

A social research colleague, who had studied three community fisheries around the Tonle Sap Lake, similarly discovered that the leaders of the community fisheries he researched are caught in such a dilemma. As he put it:

On the fishery community side, local people acknowledged that the commune councillors' involvement gives them strength to better deal with offenders because they have authority and connection with the police and fishery department ... however, sometimes they use their authority to dominate the community, causing rather conflictual relationships between the two. (Interview, 21 February 2013; see also Kim forthcoming)

Öjendal (2013) also shows concerns that the inclusion of local officials in CBO membership casts their autonomy into doubt.

### ***5.3. Resistance from Within***

Despite growing intervention by the state, a fascinating development observed in fieldwork is that a large number of NGOs and CBOs have demonstrated strategies and abilities to stay engaged with the state yet retain their positions. Gramsci was right when he pointed out that the hegemonic project of the state is never complete, but counter-hegemonic forces usually struggle against it. A number of interviews generally echoed the following sentiments:

The relationship between civil society and the government is very important and unavoidable. At the same time, civil society should be more careful in dealing with the government. My advice is, don't go too deep with the government. (Interview, 4 March 2009)

Trust building is important. Usually it needs time and patience before the organisation is trusted ... government officials and I are like friends, we go drinking together ... NGOs need to soften their stance in relation to the government, as their primary mission remains largely unaffected. They need to play the game well. (Interview, 9 June 2009)

A provincial NGO leader put forward another intriguing tactic:

NGOs have to adopt both formal and informal relationships with the authorities to achieve their objectives effectively. But in the case of our organisation, the informal channel is the most important and relevant. Even though the authorities hate us, we still must get closer to them and [get to know them better], informing them of the



intended results or purposes of our organisation. Anyone who wants to catch a tiger must enter its cave. (Interview, 6 October 2011)

The leader's metaphor equating the authorities with a tiger means his organisation has not given in but has productively engaged with them, slowly building trust, letting them understand what they intend to accomplish, and being flexible. He further explained a recent approach:

Just lately the authorities have been more cautious and have restricted the space for us to carry out our advocacy work, but we must be flexible. The best way forward now is, when we can't explicitly work on sensitive areas such as legal rights, we must insert advocacy aspects of hot issues into rural livelihood projects or components. (Interview, 6 October 2011)

## **6. Gramscian Sub-National Civil Society in Perspective**

The Gramscian concept has proved relevant for interpreting sub-national civil society in Cambodia. Sub-national government has taken two prominent actions lately. First, it has shown its desire to construct its hegemony by starting fully to take into its administration VDCs—which used to be quasi-civil society groups engaged by NGOs and CBOs—to achieve both grassroots development and empowerment objectives. Those NGOs and CBOs have shown deep frustration with the shift; unable to resist the politicisation of the VDCs, they have sought alternative approaches. Second, sub-national government has constricted the sphere of civil society by requiring groups to apply for permission and imposing agencies' presence and personnel during various activities conducted by NGOs. Civil society's autonomy has been compromised over the years. Despite their agendas and missions, some NGOs and CBOs have gradually given way under government pressure and begun to adopt the government's priorities to the extent that some have even changed the wording they use to avoid being seen as insensitive. The membership of government officials, though useful in some instances, has been a thorny issue for some groups. Even so, the state's hegemonic project is not absolute. Some NGOs still manage to move around, pursuing their original objectives by adopting different means; for instance, they embed legal aspects in rural livelihood programmes.

When analysing Cambodian national civil society, Laundau (2008) found that, while useful, the Gramscian concept also had its limitations. As she points out, the state is not monolithic: some state agencies cooperate well with civil society.

This paper tends along the same line, having found that some state agencies at different levels and in different locations relate to NGOs and CBOs differently. For instance, one informant appreciated the NGO's close relationships with local authorities but faced difficulties at district and provincial levels; he surmised:

The quality of relationship with authorities depends on their level; for example, village and commune authorities are usually easy to work with, but it is more difficult to deal with those at higher levels. (Interview, 6 October 2011)

Another CBO member who was also comfortable with the win-win scenario between the organisation and the state said:

Our CBO relates smoothly with the authorities because we need each other like teeth and tongue. They gain legitimacy and popularity via engaging with us, and our groups have good access to the state's services and authorities and thus we operate freely. (Interview, 9 October 2011)

Another informant, who complained about disruption from a district authority, found that of the seven provinces his organisation operates in, there had been difficulties in only one district, while cooperation in another district in the same province and in the six other provinces was much smoother.

Öjendal and Kim (2012: 16) also note: "...it is tougher on the local level, but also easier to actually get the job done". Data from the author also indicates that, though a number of civil society groups have experienced a harsher environment, some have gradually improved their relations with the state at these lower tiers, which is consistent with arguments in several other studies (Öjendal 2013; Öjendal & Kim 2012; Thon *et al.* 2009).

## **7. Gramscian Civil Society and Embedded Advocacy: A New Model in the Making?**

Andrew Wells-Dang (2013), comparing Cambodian and Vietnamese civil society networks in a forthcoming study, found that the fact that Cambodian networks operate more freely from the state has not produced more successful outcomes because the Cambodian state appears less receptive than the Vietnamese state to influence from civil society. Further, he critically proposes that, because Cambodia's ruling party has consolidated power, the civil society context and space may resemble that of Vietnam; hence, the liberal "autonomous civil society" may not work (Wells-Dang 2013). The Vietnamese counterparts of civil society networks have been more effective when they applied "embedded advocacy" as tools to realise their goals. That sub-national government in Cambodia has co-opted VDCs confirms Wells-Dang's prediction. As Cambodian sub-national civil society seems to be moving towards a Gramscian rather than a liberal situation, and given that some civil society groups' engagement strategies have worked, perhaps it is time for other civil society groups to follow suit. They could be more open to the new, potentially viable *modus operandi* of embedding and being soft with the state, yet retain their agenda and advocate from within.

## **8. Conclusion**

Scholars on civil society warn about the difficulties of understanding and interpreting civil society, especially when it travels from the North (where ambiguity was already entrenched in the concept) (Khilnani 2001) to the global South. The majority of writers have viewed Cambodian civil society through a liberal lens. This is perhaps not surprising, as it forms part of the donor community's global good governance agenda, which strives for both a stronger accountable state and a strengthened and autonomous civil society to demand accountability from the state. Other perspectives of civil society, therefore, are less attractive. However, the liberal understanding of civil society has experienced limits (Bui 2013). Investigating sub-national civil society from the Gramscian perspective allows us to supplement the existing model and has the potential to offer a fresh outlook, which may work in the context of a dominant government that is understandably reluctant to embrace good governance (Henke 2011) and of NGOs and CBOs having adopted the ideology and positions of good governance.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. CBOs Adopted by Various Support Agencies

Names	Used by
Cow bank, pig bank	CIDSE, Agricam
Rice bank, rice bank association	CIDSE, GTZ/CBRDP, VSF-CICDA
Self-help group	CIDSE, PADEK
Cash association	GTZ/CBRDP
Saving group	FAO
Production start-up group Agriculture improvement program group	ADESS
Women's group	JICA
Farmer club	IPM, Austcare
Farmer association ( <i>samakum</i> )	CEDAC
Farmer organisation ( <i>angkar</i> )	FAO
Community-based organisation ( <i>sahakum</i> )	CIDSE, PADEK
Natural resources management group	CIDSE
Farmer water user community ( <i>sahakum</i> )	GTZ-CBRDP, FAO, JICA, GRET
Agricultural cooperative ( <i>sahakum aphiwat kacekam / sahako</i> )	MAFF-DAE, ADESS, BFD
Professional group	Agricam
Producer association (including seed associations)	GTZ/CBRDP, GRET
Fruit organisation/mushroom, vegetable production/chicken meat association	Agricam
Village-based livestock association	GTZ/CBRDP, VSF-CICDA

Source: Couturier *et al.* (2006: 16)

### Appendix 2. Types of Farmer Organisations, as Adopted by Couturier *et al.* (2006)

#### 1. Farmer group (*krom*)

Grassroots; informal or recognised by village chief or commune council; five to 30 members (sometimes more). Usually the objective is mutual assistance between members.

Examples: rice banks, traditional associations, farmer clubs (IPM), self-help groups (Padek), farmer associations (CEDAC), women's groups.

#### 2. Farmer association (*samakum*)

Have by-laws, objectives and structure; recognised by local authorities or registered under Ministry of Interior; more than 30 members. The main objective is mutual assistance between members; secondary objective can be economic. Farmer associations often gather several farmer groups from the same area.

Examples: community-based organisations (CIDSE, Ockenden), village animal health worker associations (VSF-CICDA), village farmer associations (CEDAC).

### **3. Farmer community (*sahakum*)**

Objective to manage and use common natural resources: water, forest, fish. The number of members depends on the size of the target area.

Examples: farmer water user communities, forestry communities, fishery communities.

### **4. Farming business community (*sahakum kace atchivakam*)**

Have by-laws, objectives and structure; recognised by local authorities or under Provincial Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (following royal decree on agricultural cooperatives). The main objective is economic. Communities usually have more than 30 members.

Examples: agricultural cooperatives (MAFF), cooperatives (BFD), chicken raiser association (Siem Reap, Agricam), trade centres (CIDSE)

### **5. Federation (*sahapouan*)**

Network that gathers several farmer groups, farmer associations, farmer communities or farmer cooperatives to achieve common objectives. It can be a commune, district, provincial or national network.

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