

**SPACE**

Strengthening Performance, Accountability and Civic Engagement



# Decentralisation and Democratic Accountability

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In a small village in Kampong Thom's Sandan district, more than eighty kilometres from the provincial centre, Sok Chhay and his friends discuss the terrible state of health care in their commune. A number of children with chronic diarrhoea have died en route to the NGO funded health centre across the river. Mothers rely on poorly tried traditional birth attendants. A local commune health centre sits empty, its staff having returned to Kampong Thom town several months ago.

How does the dilemma of Sok Chhay and his friends relate to decentralisation? How does it relate to democratic accountability?

Decentralisation, we are often told, is about transferring the authority and responsibility for implementing certain government functions from the national level to local, elected councils. According to the literature, it is about 'bringing government closer to the people', and about improved service delivery, because local governments should better understand the needs of their local citizens.

Bringing government closer to the villagers of Sandan does not automatically mean that the needs of those villagers will be understood, or even heard. Sok Chhay voted in the commune elections, and his elected commune councillors voted in the district and provincial elections. But how will these elected councillors know and understand his needs and concerns, and those of his neighbours? A walk around the village, and through the other villages in the commune, and in Sandan district, quickly reveals that while many agree with Chhay's concerns about health care, they have other concerns too. A farmer in the neighbouring village is concerned about getting advice from the District Department of Agriculture, which he thinks might improve dry season yields on his young family's small plot of land. The pineapple grower living across the road from Chhay wants better access to a local market to sell her products. Other commune and district citizens are concerned about poor irrigation, absent school teachers, domestic violence and alcoholism, migration across the Thai border, lack of employment opportunities for school leavers, and the damage being done to local roads by trucks rumbling past from a nearby economic concession.

If government, at any sub-national level, becomes aware of the concerns and needs expressed by Chhay and his neighbours, how should it respond? Local government resources are limited, and it is clear that any government cannot respond to all of the needs of citizens, all of the time. How does Chhay's commune council, for example, respond to his concerns about health care? How does the district council elected by Chhay's commune councillors and the other councillors in Sandan respond to the concerns about lack of irrigation that affect all of the communes in the district? How do the councils promote economic development? Do the councils have the authority and the resources to address these issues?

These are important questions about decision-making processes, and they raise even more questions. How do councils set agendas so that different issues can be considered? What rules guide their consideration of issues and decision-making? Do the rules ensure the councils interact with citizens? With those particularly affected by issues? With community

organisations representing groups of citizens? How do the councils learn from the results of past policies and programs? What information do they need in order to make decisions? Who will implement those decisions? How and when will the implementers report back to the councils on their progress? What happens when their progress is unsatisfactory?

Chhay's story helps us to understand the idea of democratic accountability, which is essentially concerned with **citizen representatives reaching and making collective-choice decisions, in the interests of those citizens, within a legal mandate which sets out their authorities, powers, and lines of responsibility**. In this respect, democratic accountability requires three conditions:

## 1 | Voice

The first condition necessary for democratic accountability is voice. At its core is citizen engagement – the idea that opportunities will exist for citizens' voice to be heard, understood and considered by government. One aspect of voice comes from the idea of social accountability, where citizens evaluate the activities of government and demand actions be taken when government performance is not satisfactory. Another equally important aspect is that government will provide opportunities for citizens' voices to be heard. This might be achieved, for example, through forums, consultations, and informal exchanges.

## 2 | 'Deliberation' Space

The second important condition necessary to achieve democratic accountability is that there is sufficient 'space' for deliberation. There are three important ideas here. The first is that political choices are separated from technical matters. In Cambodia, this means that the political choices of elected councils are clearly separated from the technical work of Boards of Governors and council personnel. In this way, deliberative space is concerned with the rules and processes for the horizontal relationships between the different sub-national government actors. These rules and processes should ensure that the councils are making choices about priorities based on evidence (data, studies, information about past successes and failures), and that Boards of Governors and personnel are providing that evidence, implementing the decisions which come from the councils' choices, and are reporting back to the councils on their progress.

The second important idea is that different arenas are created for deliberation to take place. As discussed above, arenas need to be established for citizen voice to be heard. Arenas also need to be established for elected representatives to assess the merits of different issues in setting their agendas for deliberation. And they need to be established to create a political space for those issues to be discussed and debated, for priorities to be set, for those priorities to be eventually included in plans for action, and for those plans to be assessed and evaluated.

The final important idea is lines of responsibility and sanctions. At one level, the elected

councils are accountable to those who elected them. In this case, the ballot box is the ultimate method of sanction. If you are unhappy with the performance of your commune council, you can vote for a different party at the next election. If the commune councillors are unhappy with the performance of district councillors, they can vote differently at the next election. In addition to elections, there are other more subtle sanctions, such as a district council reporting a poor performing governor to the Ministry of Interior. Further sanctions might develop over time – a district council using its budgeting powers to withhold salary increases to poor performing staff; or a commune council deciding to withhold payment or no longer contract services from a poor performing district office.

## 'Discretion' Space

The third necessary condition for democratic accountability is that space exists for discretion. This means two things. First, it means that governments have a clear mandate, which is understood, and that within that mandate they have sufficient authority to be able to address citizen concerns and issues of importance, including cross-sectoral issues such as economic development. This has important implications for the transfer of functions – if functions are too narrowly defined, there will be no discretionary space in which government can take action. Second, it means that any authority given to the councils needs to be matched with sufficient resources (including human resources, financial resources, and physical resources), and that the councils need discretion in setting priorities and deciding how to use those resources.

What does it all mean for Sok Chhay? It means that the commune council directly elected by Sok Chhay and his neighbours, and the councils elected by those councillors, make decisions in the best interest of Chhay and his fellow citizens. It means that there is a clear separation between the political, decision-making role of Sok Chhay's councils, and the technical, implementing role of the council's staff and the governors at different levels. It means that lines of responsibility exist, and that these lines of responsibility are reinforced by sanctions, including the ballot box. It also means that the councils make their decisions based on meaningful and sustained engagement with Chhay's community, that rules and processes are in place which provide space for debate and decision making, that the councils have a mandate which is clearly understood, that they have sufficient authority to make decisions, and that they have sufficient discretion over how and when their resources are used.