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Social Accountability in Service Delivery in Cambodia

Eng Netra, Vong Mun and Hort Navy



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CDRI

📍 56, Street 315, Tuol Kork, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

✉ PO Box 622, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

☎ (855-23) 881384/881701/881916/883603

📠 (855-23) 880734

E-mail: cdri@cdri.org.kh

Website: www.cdri.org.kh

Edited by: Susan Watkins

Layout and Cover Design: Meas Raksmeay and Oum Chantha

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Acronyms

ANSA-EAP	Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in East Asia and the Pacific
BfH	Buddhism for Health
CCC	Cooperation Committee for Cambodia
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
CRC	Citizen report card
CSC	Community scorecard
CSCHSP	Community Score Card for Health Services Project
DCD	Department of Curriculum Development
DFGG	Demand for good governance
DOE	District Office of Education
HC	Health centre
HCMC	Health centre management committee
KAD	Khmer Association for Development
KIND	Khmer Institute for National Development
MEF	Ministry of Economy and Finance
MOEYS	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport
MOH	Ministry of Health
NGO	Non-government organisation
OD	Operational district
PDE	Provincial Department of Education
PDH	Publishing and distribution house
PETS	Public expenditure tracking survey
PPWSA	Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VHSG	Village Health Support Group

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Abstract

Social accountability is becoming integral to the government of Cambodia's reform agenda as a new approach to promote and empower citizens' collective voice to demand accountability from state officials for improved public services. International donors and non-government organisations have initiated and implemented various tools of social accountability in Cambodia. This study examines three recent examples of social accountability initiatives in health, education and clean water. It focuses on how ordinary citizens, particularly the poor and women, have engaged with the accountability initiatives, the opportunities and the constraints they face in trying to mobilise and pose demands on state officials. The state, for its part, is not homogeneous and is shown attempting to control and respond selectively to citizens' voices and demands. The study investigates the outcomes of these claims, and the power of citizens and NGOs to promote social collective action and to influence public service performance. It also questions the effects of these initiatives on citizen empowerment and broader state-society relations.

Promising results for improved services emerge in health and education but due not so much to social accountability as to the pressure of electoral accountability resulting from the 2013 national election. Changes in empowerment and improved state-society relations are insignificant because ordinary citizens and the poor remain fearful of exerting their voice, and because government and NGOs are implementing very weak forms of social accountability. This study contributes a critical analysis of external accountability interventions, and sheds new light on the nature of state-society relations as they evolve in Cambodia.

1. Introduction

Cambodia, like many countries receiving aid, has found growing emphasis by international donors and civil society organisations on social accountability. Since the early 2000s, social accountability has become a central component of donor support to the public sector reform programme, aimed at improving service delivery and relations between the state and civil society. A great many international and Cambodian non-government organisations (NGOs) implement various social accountability tools. Most if not all of these initiatives are projects financed by international donors. Many are implemented locally, involving mainly commune authorities and service providers in sectors such as health and education, even though local authorities do not yet have a mandate to deliver these services.

The government, as part of decentralisation and deconcentration reform, adopted a Strategic Plan on Social Accountability for Sub-National Democratic Development in 2013. However, little has been written about social accountability in Cambodia, aside from Burke and Nil (2004), World Bank (2013), Rodan and Hughes (2012), Norman (2014) and Babovic and Vukovic (2014). Most research was conducted at an early stage of social accountability initiatives in Cambodia and prior to the increased opening of political competition after the 2013 National Assembly election, where the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), the ruling party for over two decades, surprisingly gained 27 fewer seats than in the 2008 election. More importantly, scarce attention has been given to how and why social accountability initiatives emerge in Cambodia and to what extent they work to motivate collective citizen actions and influence state responses. This study is intended as a contribution to filling this gap and helping to inform realistic expectations of social accountability.

In consultations with some of the major actors in the delivery of social accountability initiatives, in government, international donors and civil society, some key informants questioned whether such a study was necessary and whether research would be better directed at baseline studies that might inform the design and the government's implementation of the Social Accountability Framework adopted in 2014. The research team carefully considered this point but came to the conclusion that such research was needed at this stage; otherwise future social accountability initiatives particularly those delivered at the commune level would fail to reflect the lessons already learned.

This paper investigates how social accountability initiatives have worked in Cambodia, why they worked in the ways they have and with what results. Specifically, the study examines the extent to which social accountability has delivered its promises. What is its contribution to empowering ordinary Cambodians to mobilise effectively and pressure public officials into promoting policies that benefit them and improve public services? The support of social accountability by donors and government offers a range of opportunities to different actors. We want to know whether the way social accountability is being promoted and implemented in Cambodia has so far provided ordinary Cambodians (especially the poor) with genuine power to scrutinise state institutions and place public demands effectively. We examine these points through three case studies of social accountability initiatives in service delivery: primary healthcare, school textbook monitoring, and urban clean water and solid waste management.

In this paper, social accountability is defined as ongoing collective efforts by civil society to hold public officials accountable for their decisions and actions. It is to be achieved through imposing political and reputational costs on public officials to respond (Peruzotti and Smulovitz 2006).

Donors advocate social accountability for its potential to empower marginalised and previously excluded citizens in public decision-making processes, to improve governance and to enhance development outcomes (Malena, Forster and Singh 2004). A variety of social accountability tools have been experimented with. These include citizen scorecards for social services, public expenditure tracking surveys, local participatory budgeting, public forums, capacity building and other forms of local civic engagement. Social accountability is thus an evolving umbrella concept for a wide range of approaches adopted by civil society to aggregate and exert voice on state officials (on voice, see Goetz and Jenkins 2005; Hirschman 1970).

The underlying assumptions behind social accountability are twofold. First, it is assumed that citizens' access to information about their government's performance alone will motivate them to take collective action. Second, the theory assumes that state officials are fearful of public exposure of corruption and poor performance; thus disseminating information about poor services or misuse of public money will generate sufficient pressure for the government to improve services.

In reality, however, information alone does not motivate collective action or put pressure on state actors to respond. Indeed, information about misuse of public money, poor services and unprofessional service providers is already in the public domain. A number of research studies have shown no impact of information dissemination on collective action and state responsiveness (Khemani 2007; Joshi 2013; Lieberman, Posner and Tsai 2013; Ravallion et al. 2013). In addition, citizens decide whether to participate in collective action by weighing up the perceived costs and benefits of their participation. Studies have found that citizens, especially the poor, are reluctant to take part in collective action due to fear of official reprisal and fear of disrupting personalised relationships and assistance provided by state officials (Goetz and Jenkins 1999; Tembo 2013). This suggests citizens' lack of power rather than lack of information.

Equally important, simply publicising information that everyone already knows is unlikely to pressure officials to change their way of working, particularly where democratic accountability is not functioning (Schatz 2013). Exposing corruption and abuse of power by state officials is not enough unless the state itself is empowered and prepared to act against abusers and corrupt officials. In some other contexts, even if service providers are willing to act on the demands posed by citizens, they may lack resources and discretion to do so. As Peruzotti and Smulovitz (2006) note in their writing about the experience of Latin America, the success of social accountability there reflects the growing capacity and diversity of social associations and citizen movements with strong public support in a context of increasing decentralisation and greater democratisation.

We can summarise from this body of evidence that citizens need capacity and power in applying the social accountability approach to hold the government to account and transforming existing state-society relations in the interest of the poor and marginalised. The capacity and leverage won by citizens, and their movements through engaging in social accountability initiatives, trigger their motivation to take such initiatives seriously. At the same time, effective social accountability reform requires willingness and capacity of the government to respond to public demands. This is mutually reinforcing in that public demands may trigger state responses, and effective state responses can also empower the public to mobilise and make demands (Fox 2007, 2014). This depends on the nature of issues targeted by social accountability initiatives.

The evidence suggests that for social accountability initiatives to produce concrete results, the balance of power needs to shift in favour of the poor in their relations with the state. For civil society to hold public officials to account over performance and decisions, it must have power to do so. Although social accountability lacks direct sanctioning power, advocates have emphasised three forms of sanctions: turning on the alarm by bringing information to the attention of the public, exposing abuse of power and imposing political and reputational costs, and causing other powerful state agencies to act on that information (Peruzotti and Smulovitz 2006).

Furthermore, research has increasingly found that social accountability initiatives are context-specific and exist as part of the broader power relations in a society (Goetz and Jenkins 2005; O'Meally 2013; Tembo 2013). This may explain why similar social accountability initiatives in different contexts produce different results. For instance, community monitoring was found to improve public services in Uganda but not in India. The variation was attributed to social activism, characteristics of service sectors and the countries' political economies (Khemani 2008). This suggests that social accountability is largely a tool without power. Related to this observation, Joshi and Houtzager (2012) have argued that tool-based social accountability approaches that focus on information dissemination and citizens' monitoring are very weak forms of accountability and are unable to change the underlying causes of public sector failure. This may partly explain the mixed results of social accountability initiatives in realising the three outcomes mentioned earlier (Joshi 2013; Fox 2014).

This suggests that empowering poor citizens vis-à-vis the state to gain leverage over public authority is very difficult without broader changes in power relations. This study proceeds from the assumption that building citizen power to engage in social accountability is conditioned by the pre-existing unequal distribution of power and the nature of social and community resource endowments and relationships. It is therefore necessary to examine empowerment with regard to poor citizens' sources of livelihood, ideological status and access to protection from official reprisal. The study also assumes that poor citizens are constrained by their lack of resources, capacity and time to act politically compared to elite and wealthy citizens. The study will analyse this aspect by looking at poor citizens' motivation and capacity in applying social accountability.

Research questions

The overarching research question addressed in this study is: How have social accountability initiatives been implemented in Cambodia and to what extent have they impacted on society-state relations in favour of the poor?

In resolving this question, the study will examine:

- How have social accountability initiatives worked in reality?
- Why have they worked that way?
- What have been the outcomes from such initiatives?
- What are the potential implications of these initiatives for state-society relations in Cambodia?

Research methods

We have chosen a qualitative case study approach to address the research questions. The study is based on case studies of three social accountability initiatives implemented in Cambodia. Although they were sensitively chosen and analytically contextualised, the evidence presented cannot immediately be generalised. Fieldwork took place between July and December 2014 and was conducted in Khmer by three Cambodian researchers.

Data collection and sources

In total, we conducted 87 semi-structured interviews with local elites and villagers, both participants and non-participants of the projects living in the project locations, national and local government officials and representatives of NGOs and donors. At an early stage, interviews were conducted with national NGOs and donors to get their perspectives on the current state of social accountability. These initial perspectives informed the research design and were useful to arrange subsequent interviews with other stakeholders. Central to this were the NGOs implementing the social accountability initiatives, which provided contacts for interviews with local informants. After the national interviews, the team visited the project locations and interviewed local authorities, local project representatives and service provider officials to learn their views about the projects. The team then conducted in-depth interviews with villagers who were involved in some project activities to understand their sources of livelihood, their reasons for and benefits from taking part in the projects and their use of evidence collected from social accountability projects to influence policy. We also talked to villagers who were not involved in the projects but lived in the location to examine their awareness of the projects and their reasons for not participating.

In addition to primary data from the interviews, secondary data from NGO project documents and government documents and databases were reviewed. Secondary materials provided evidence of the nature of the project and the outcomes.

To ensure data accuracy and minimise bias, we were mindful of triangulation among sources. As a rule, any general statements in this paper were supported by at least three different sources. Otherwise, expressions such as “an informant said that” are used to indicate statements that lack confirmation but which we considered sufficiently significant to include. Furthermore, selected key informants were involved in a commentary workshop held at CDRI at which preliminary findings were presented by the researchers. The purpose was to obtain their feedback on these findings and the extent to which they thought them reflective of the state of affairs. Comments on the preliminary findings were analysed by the researchers, leading up to the final paper.

Case study selection

This study examines three examples of social accountability projects: a national textbook monitoring implemented by Khmer Institute for National Development (KIND), a health centre scorecard initiative by Buddhists for Development (BfD) and urban clean water and solid waste management implemented by Silaka. We chose these projects because the Cambodian NGOs that were implementing them were cooperative in sharing information and experience about the projects. The team also wanted to select diverse examples of accountability initiatives in social service delivery. The three case studies were selected based on their sectors’ importance in national development. Water, education and health are essential public services for meeting

basic human needs. In these areas, Cambodia has achieved significant progress over the years but still faces tremendous challenges. For this reason, social services remain high on the government's development agenda despite increasing emphasis on private sector development to promote economic growth. In recent years, education and health have been top beneficiaries of national budget allocations alongside defence and security. The 2013 national election results also had a bearing on our case selection, in which the ruling Cambodia People's Party won 27 fewer National Assembly seats than in the 2008 election. This surprising result has put immense pressure on the government and the CPP to rethink its strategy and policy in reclaiming the legitimacy associated with being seen as effective and with the ability to get things done. Four key national ministries (Education, Commerce, Economy and Environment) have been placed under new leaders who project a new image of young, well-educated and reform-minded politicians, and are at the same time staffed by loyal and well-connected senior CPP officials. There have also been various efforts to increase the professionalism of civil servants and make them more responsive and effective. Our attention to service delivery reflects this changing context.

Limitations of the study

An obvious limitation is that this study looks at only three examples of social accountability projects and only in service delivery, and has therefore excluded other social accountability initiatives in areas such as natural resources, land, budget management and access to information. According to our interviews with donors and NGOs working on social accountability, the sensitive nature of these issues in Cambodia causes NGOs and donors to shy away from these sectors, which may be a wise choice if it is known that social accountability initiatives in these sectors are unlikely to work. Service delivery is quite different from other sectors (revenue collection and natural resource management) in its space for manoeuvre by civil society and international donors because it falls in the acceptable area of reform, seen by ruling elites as important to their strategy to remain in power. In fact, the government's social accountability strategy covers only three sectors: health, education and commune services. This is also because reform in service delivery of health, education and clean water would not significantly affect the elite's interest in sectors like land and natural resources. Improvement in basic service delivery legitimises the elite's strategy and typically meets the demands of international donors.

Structure of the study

This study is structured into seven chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the study by discussing key concepts, research questions and methods. Chapter 2 reviews debates in social accountability literature by pointing out the limitation of the normative conceptual framework used in international development, and discusses the study's approach and propositions. Chapter 3 provides historical and contextual information about the state and about civil society in Cambodia, and the relationship between the two. Chapters 4 to 6 examine cases of social accountability initiatives. Chapter 4 investigates an initiative in clean water and solid waste management in an urban town. Chapter 5 looks at an initiative in the education sector to identify and expose corruption and leakages related to public school textbooks. Chapter 6 considers community scorecards for service provision by health centres. Chapter 7 draws together the key arguments from the three empirical chapters, reflects on their experience and considers future directions.

2. Conceptual framework for social accountability

Social accountability is more recent than the concept of general accountability but is intrinsically linked to it. While accountability is advocated in international development as the cornerstone of democracy and governance, social accountability is promoted for its contributions to achieving enhanced accountability between state and society. Social accountability can improve accountability, both by complementing existing mechanisms such as elections, demonstrations and watchdogs and by reinforcing formal accountability institutions. The effectiveness of social accountability depends on a number of factors but, as this chapter will show, the actual relationships between citizens and authorities matter significantly and are key in understanding the conditions within which social accountability initiatives emerge and work. In other words, the analytical framework developed in this chapter takes the influence of power relations—as formed by the ongoing interactions and engagements between citizens and state authorities—in the process of accountability seriously.

Rationales and promises of social accountability

The contemporary attraction of social accountability within development circles may be traced to two key sources. The first relates to the growing consensus that the failure of formal accountability institutions has been widespread and one of the main impediments to governance and development in developing countries (O'Donnell 1999; Narayan et al. 2000; World Bank 2004a). Since the early 2000s, accountability and, more recently, social accountability have become core elements of governance reform being promoted throughout the developing world (Rodan and Hughes 2014). However, the enthusiasm of international development agencies for accountability has been more related to achieving an efficient, effective and capable state for development than to the protection and enhancement of citizens' political authority (World Bank 2004b). The significance of this way of conceptualising accountability and social accountability has been informed by the “New Public Management” approach, where accountability relations between state and citizens are equated to relations between service providers and users and measureable output and performance indicators dominate (World Bank 2004a). This view contradicts the challenges faced by women and poor people, who find themselves marginalised and constrained in their ability to mobilise and demand change from the state (Narayan et al. 2000, 172).

The second source of attraction for social accountability is the belief and expectations among development practitioners surrounding the roles of civil society and civic engagement in extracting accountability. It is argued that a more active and expansive citizen engagement, participation and oversight in the public decision-making process is crucial to democratic and accountable governance. Although election is the most obvious form for citizens to exercise their rights and express their voice, election in itself is limited and is not sufficient to uphold accountability (Schedler 2006). Because of this, new social accountability mechanisms, opportunities for citizens and civil society organisations to scrutinise and monitor the performance and action of state officials, have been particularly emphasised in recent years by international development agencies (World Bank 2004c; Ackerman 2005; United Nations 2008). For instance, the United Nations report “People Matter” argues that “a new vision of public governance is required, a conception that goes well beyond the bureaucratic norms of public administration and reaches out to citizens who provide resources for rethinking their roles as members of the body politic. They are, after all, the ultimate elements of that body

and therefore have the right to participate in the processes that produce goods and services” (United Nations 2008, 24). The important roles of and optimism about citizen engagement and civil society participation in governance are similarly advocated in the World Bank’s report on *State-Society Synergy for Accountability*, which emphasises “constructing a healthy relationship between state and society so that social actors and individual citizens are empowered to oblige the government to uphold the rule of law and fulfil its promises” (World Bank 2004c, 5).

For this reason, social accountability has become one of the key governance reform programmes in many developing countries. Advocates within international development agencies argue that social accountability can contribute to three outcomes: empowering citizens, improving service delivery and strengthening governance. First, they argue that social accountability creates new opportunities for poor and marginalised citizens to receive essential information and provide feedback; this empowers them to articulate their voice effectively and redefines power relations in their interest. Second, the enhanced citizens’ voice can pressure the government to provide services competently, and this is considered a developmental outcome of social accountability. Third, social accountability provides a platform for constructive engagement between citizens and government, which is conducive to productive change and good governance.

Furthermore, social accountability is expected to achieve this outcome through imposing political and reputational costs on public officials by two key means: (1) turning on the alarm by putting information about the performance and behaviour of officials into the public spotlight, and (2) activating powerful oversight agencies to act on the information. As Peruzotti and Smulovitz (2006, 26) point out, “Social mechanisms constitute an alternative mechanism for imposing costs on political actors and are a necessary condition for the operation of those institutional mechanisms that have mandatory sanctioning capacities.” The emphasis on “public exposure of officials’ wrongdoing”, “turning on the alarm” and “activating oversight agencies” as indirect sanction measures requires not only the willingness of citizens to make demands but also the capacity to confront public officials. It also requires the acceptance by state agencies of the power of citizens over government and the willingness and capacity of the state to act against abusers. For this reason, public denunciations of corrupt officials or of poor services are insufficient to address the problems unless the state itself acts against those accused or changes how services are delivered. This point is important, as Guillermo O’Donnell (1999) emphasises in writing about the importance of the rule of law and the ability of state agents to act against other state agents for corruption and abuse of power in new democracies in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

Conceptual framework

There are two possible conceptual frameworks for the study of social accountability. The first is closely associated with the work of international financial institutions and development agencies, and is influenced by the World Bank’s 2004 World Development Report on public service delivery. Social accountability in this framework emphasises citizens’ access to information and their capacity to organise and turn information into evidence that can be used by citizens in the available accountability forums to pressure officials to implement policies that will lead to improved services and better governance. For example, social accountability involves citizens’ rights to information, to participate and to monitor public decision making and to make demands for better services and improved policy outcomes for the poor (World Bank 2004b). The emphasis on information and capacity is further illustrated in many reports

about social accountability by development practitioners that seek to expand access to information through a rights-based approach and transparency legislation and to strengthen the capacity of citizens and civil society organisations through capacity building and education. It is believed that equipping citizens with information and evidence and developing citizens' capacity empowers them to take collective actions and influence public policies. This idea is implicit in a World Bank report:

By providing critical information on rights and entitlements and soliciting systematic feedback from poor people, social accountability mechanisms provide a means to increase and aggregate the voice of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. This enhanced voice empowers the poor and increases the chance of greater responsiveness on the part of the state to their needs. (Malena, Forster and Singh 2004, 5)

This focus on information and capacity assumes that the inability of citizens to participate, question and place demands on state officials is a direct result of citizens' lack of information about public services and the performance of state officials, and lack of understanding about their rights. This approach further assumes that there is already motivation among citizens; hence, when aided by greater access to information and capacity-building programmes, they will be equipped and empowered to monitor, engage and confront state officials. Thus, the prospects for social accountability programmes rely on sustained capacity support by NGOs and continuous policy and legal analysis so that new evidence about public officials' performance and activities can be gathered and established to raise public awareness, and can ultimately empower and lead citizens to public actions demanding change.

In reality, however, access to information and turning this information into evidence is inadequate to stimulate poor people to take action against power holders. In many cases, poor people are well aware of the state of their local schools and health facilities, and how much money they need to bribe officials in order to have access to those facilities (Jenkins and Goetz 1999). For instance, Banerjee et al. conducted a field experiment to test whether information about public schools motivated community collective actions and influenced school performance in Uttar Pradesh in India. They studied three interventions: information dissemination about roles and responsibilities of the school system; collection and discussion of school report cards; and volunteers who read to the children to improve their learning outcomes. They found that "the interventions did nothing to increase the parents' engagement with the schools" (Banerjee et al. 2010, 23). They concluded that "neither providing information on the channel of interventions available to villagers, nor helping citizens gather information on the status of education in their villages, led to greater involvement of parents in the school systems, or to private responses" (Banerjee et al. 2010, 27). This suggests that providing information did not activate existing oversight bodies within the school nor create motivation for parental collective action to hold the school accountable.

Furthermore, citizens are unlikely to engage in collective action if they perceive that the costs are greater than the perceived benefits. The cost involved in citizen activism is well documented, entailing reprisal and disruption to personal relationships between citizens and public officials (Jenkins and Goetz 1999). Jonathan Fox reported that the Right-to-Know Movement in India resulted in the assassination of 41 information requesters, and many hundreds more subjected to threat and injury (Fox 2014, 27). Equally important, citizens are unwilling to engage in collective action if they perceive it as unlikely to influence public sector performance. Mansuri and Rao (2013) reviewed 500 studies of participatory interventions and found that induced

participation often failed to mobilise citizen enthusiasm and engagement because it tends to be co-opted by elites or is not effective in redistributing resources and power.

This evidence suggests that social accountability, like many other social collective actions, is not a technical process and tool-based approach removed from ongoing struggles over how resources and power are distributed. Rather, social accountability relationships are grounded in power relationships and very much reflect the broader conflicts over power and resources in a society. Many studies have concluded that the successes of social accountability initiatives are very context-specific and embedded in political processes that determine when and how strategies and mechanisms citizens employ work in reality (Institute of Development Studies 2010; O'Meally 2013; Tembo 2013). Joshi and Houtzager (2012, 158) have further documented the limit of social accountability tools for civil society oversight and voice, as opposed to the broader coalition of advocacy for policy reform.

This criticism leads to the second conceptual framework employed in the study of social accountability, associated with a political economy approach. This regards the form and prospect of social accountability as shaped by political struggles between competing social forces over power and resources. From this perspective, empowerment of the poor to use social accountability to pressure the state to implement policies to serve them better is not so much a matter of access to information and capacity building, as of their motivation to mobilise and take a critical stance against the state and their relationship with broader power structures.

The emphasis on motivation and power suggests that the social accountability programme is not a question of knowing one's rights and developing one's capacity, but of involvement in a political struggle aimed at redistributing resources and power from power holders to the poor. This process involves conflict resulting from opposition and resistance on the part of the power holders. In this view, the poor are empowered to use the gathered evidence and develop their capacity promoted by social accountability programmes to engage with and pressure the state into implementing policies that will benefit them when such initiatives link the specific social accountability objective with advancing the existing struggle in their favour.

For this reason, this study takes a political economy approach to analysing poor people's engagement in social accountability projects and the impact of this on the quality of social services. A political economy analysis implies that pre-existing distributions of power and the nature of social and community resource endowments and relationships will have a significant effect on the ability of the poor to engage in these projects. It also suggests that because of the material and ideational constraints upon their ability to act politically, the poor begin from a disadvantaged position compared to wealthier community members.

Propositions of the study

This study proceeds from four assumptions. First, it is assumed that, for the poor to take a critical stance against state officials, it is necessary that they be relatively empowered. In this study, empowerment is a function of existing and long-term patterns of interaction within communities and society, rather than the temporary product of training programmes or capacity building exercises. Specifically, empowerment is a function of independence of income and wealth from state benevolence; status reflecting through level of education, confidence and respect; and degree of protection against authority and the powerful. If the poor's autonomy is

important for them to take up social accountability tools to pressure authorities for change, it is expected that the vulnerable and the very poor will find it very difficult to use the tools.

Second, it is assumed that the poor's level of motivation is important in stimulating them to turn information into evidence that can lead to them taking action. Motivation in political economy is not merely a matter of whether the poor understand the issue confronting them. Motivation comes from the potential costs and benefits of involvement with social accountability projects. It is how poor people calculate the benefits and costs when they are heavily constrained in what they can do by lack of time, lack of resources and lack of security. It is expected that the poor are more likely to use the social accountability tools and evidence to help them mobilise and confront authorities if the issues are of pressing and immediate concern to them.

Third, the study assumes that existing capacity among the poor to make claims and exert pressures on the state may be necessary for a social accountability initiative to achieve its expected outcomes. Citizens' capacity for engagement with state officials is shaped by previous and ongoing experiences of engagement. Therefore, it is expected that the success of social accountability projects depends on the extent to which capacity building activities being promoted by NGOs and donors are aligned with and built on existing capacities.

Finally, it is expected that the nature of the issue will affect each of these variables. It is worth asking whether the political sensitivity, local historical context or significance for the power base of the state surrounding an issue have any explanatory power with respect to outcomes. It is expected that outcomes will vary across different issues.

Adopting the political economy approach to the study of social accountability requires that we take into account these four propositions in assessing variations in performance and project outcomes, which will be examined in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

3. Local state-society relations

We argued in Chapter 2 that the effectiveness of social accountability initiatives in transforming relations between the state and society in the interests of the poor and the weak is complex and context-specific. We also pointed out that the accountability relationship created by social accountability initiatives is not an isolated experience that external actors can effectively promote and implement. Rather, such initiatives are shaped by the broader structure of relations in society. In fact, these relations reflect and reinforce the characters of the broader relationships between citizens and state. This suggests that transforming existing relations through social accountability is very difficult and requires broader changes.

In this chapter, we examine Cambodia's local state-society context, which conditions how social accountability initiatives work. This chapter reviews the historical development of the Cambodian state, its long and violent legacy of oppression and its implications and significance for grassroots collective organisations and citizen-state relations. In particular, the chapter analyses the relationship between citizens and local authorities, examining local people's attitude towards authorities and the powerful, and how reluctant people are to fall out with authority. The chapter argues that attempts by international development agencies and donors to promote local collective demands for accountability from the state along Western liberal ideals are unlikely to be effective because these social accountability initiatives are unfamiliar

to citizens and public officials, and that they bear little resemblance to a system of rule imposed by the state and the everyday practices ordinary Cambodians rely on. Nonetheless, there are limited opportunities for political contestation to this system of rule and existing practices.

Cambodia's civil society

Due to the extreme disruptions of 30 years of war and civil conflict (for a detailed analysis of the impact, see Chandler 1998; Frings 1994; Martin 1994; Ovesen, Trankell and Öjendal 1996; Vickery 1986) and an authoritarian approach to governance (Hughes 2003; Gottesman 2005; Pak et al. 2007; Öjendal and Lilja 2009; Hughes and Un 2011), international efforts to develop home-grown civil society in Cambodia since the United Nations-organised general election of 1993 have been challenging. First, efforts by international organisations and donors to build and support civil organisations have had little to work with because many organisations have been established only recently, following the return of international aid in the 1990s. According to a recent survey by the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC), there are more than 3500 registered NGOs in Cambodia, of which around 1350 are active (CCC 2013). The vast majority of these organisations are based in Phnom Penh, far removed from the majority of ordinary Cambodians living in rural areas; hence these organisations lack social bases. According to a public opinion poll, fewer than a quarter of Cambodians belong to an organised association despite heavy investment and emphasis by international donors over the last two decades (Malena and Chhim 2009, 41). As a result, Cambodia's civil society organisations are heavily dependent on external legitimacy and financial aid.

Second, elite and international actors have been and are overwhelmingly dominant in efforts to rebuild and revive grassroots collective organisations. Cambodian NGOs are often led by Cambodians from the diaspora, with support and funding from foreign donors and international organisations. A recent study shows that subnational NGOs in Cambodia occasionally have local authorities as members or leaders (Ou and Kim 2013, 3). In this situation, opportunities offered to the poor have been manipulated and oriented towards dependence on and support from elites in patronage relationships.

Third, the dependence of NGOs in the context of external intervention and their lack of local power bases affects their relationship with the government, which is characterised by hostility and suspicion, particularly in advocacy and human rights promotion. The CCC survey confirms that "organisations promoting democracy and human rights tend to experience more obstacles in their relationship with government" (CCC 2013, 41). In this context, NGOs tend to seek support from international actors, further distancing themselves from local interests in the perspective of the government. As a result, while NGOs have been quite effective in service delivery and dissemination of democratic and good governance ideas, they are averse to regarding themselves as political actors, able to lead public opinion or influence policy.

Thus civil society's engagement with the state has been quite challenging, although recent studies at the grassroots level have found some promising signs in service delivery (Ou 2013; Öjendal and Kim 2012). One study shows that commune civil society organisations have facilitated service demands of villagers to their local representatives and improved the capacity of commune councils to address these demands. However, the authors consider this cordial relationship to be thin and fragile, especially when civil society organisations are seen by authorities as engaging in political mobilisation or when the villagers' interests they are

promoting are in conflict with the interests of powerful higher-ups (Öjendal and Kim 2012). They explain this situation as partly a reflection of civil society's own approach to working with authority, which tends to be rigid, aggressive and shaped by donors' agenda, and partly a reflection of the government's preoccupation with control and authoritarian approach.

Local authorities and mechanisms of control

Local authorities today are a product of the legacy of the Khmer Rouge era and the state-building strategy of the communist regime of the 1980s. After the end of the Khmer Rouge regime, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) recruited many ex-Khmer Rouge and defectors into local administrations because of their knowledge of the areas and existing local power bases, which were considered important for rebuilding local administration. Key leaders of the PRK era, many of whom remain in power today, selected and appointed personally trusted individuals to important local positions. CPP President Chea Sim, who was minister of the interior in the 1980s, set up this practice as a means to develop a local political network of trusted and loyal officials (Gottesman 2005). Broadly, this is still the system of filling public positions: powerful patrons manage and distribute patronage positions and opportunities.

This system of local authorities was not disrupted by the 1991-93 United Nations intervention. The CPP successfully demanded that its local administration be untouched throughout the operation. Local authorities played important roles in bolstering the position of the CPP in the 1990s and 2000s as elections became institutionalised (Slocomb 2004; Hughes et al. 2011; Pak 2011). It uses this system of local authorities to watch and control the population and support higher ranking patrons in distributing politicised development projects as part of its electoral strategy.

Civil servants and ordinary Cambodians were recruited automatically to become party members (Hughes 2003). They were regularly provided with voting information and gifts and in exchange were expected to show gratitude and vote for the party. Families of party supporters were welcome in public offices and attended to if they needed assistance. They were also invited to local meetings, including village and commune planning exercises. In areas with NGO and donor projects, they were selected to be the potential project beneficiaries.

Families and individuals who were identified as supporters of opposition parties were excluded from CPP gift-giving and information sessions. They were intentionally excluded from participating in local planning meetings and from benefiting from development projects. Observers found that, leading up to the 1993 election, villagers who were suspected members of opposition parties were arrested and forced to give up their affiliation (Ledgerwood 1996). Opposition supporters also tended to have difficulty accessing local authorities and public services and were vulnerable to problems such as conflicts.

In this situation, the best strategy of villagers was to form a good relationship and not cause any conflict with local authorities. This system of control was effective in keeping the CPP in power. Opposition parties had difficulty recruiting and mobilising supporters because villagers were reluctant to identify as opposition supporters.

Studies in the 2000s noted a strong continuity of this tendency although suggesting some important changes. For instance, a study in 2004 argued that relations between local authorities and ordinary Cambodians had changed from being based on fear to being based on respect (Öjendal and Kim 2006). However, recent studies examining citizen participation and local

governance suggest that although there are now opportunities for ordinary Cambodians to participate and have a say in local decisions, many remain reluctant and dare not challenge authorities (World Bank 2011; Kim 2012). Both studies also found that villagers who are not considered pro-CPP or do not have a good relationship with local authorities remain excluded from local meetings and development projects. Participants in these meetings and gift-giving ceremonies have to be invited by local officials. Most of the participants represent the CPP's inner circle and local authority leaders throughout meetings.

While the system of local surveillance has kept the CPP in power and still dominant in politics, it may be becoming less effective. This is shown by the significant loss of votes for the CPP in the 2013 national election. This may be due to the growing number of young voters and their high mobility as they migrate to work in Phnom Penh and abroad.

Citizens' attitude towards local authorities

The dominance of hierarchical and personal networks promoted by Cambodian leaders has always been practised by elites in Cambodia. This has informed the strategy ordinary Cambodians use in their dealings with national and local authorities. Observers have long noted that Cambodians are very fearful of state authorities and avoid as much as possible any contact with them. The ethnographic study by May Ebihara of Khmer rural life before the war also found that there was no contact or interaction between villagers and the state beyond the immediate commune chief; from the district upward, officials were considered *lokthum* (big persons) and outsiders (Ebihara 1968, 514-520). Research in 2008 among rural villagers in three communes indicated that this gap between villagers and authority persisted: the poorest population groups were reluctant or unable to name their local leaders (Thon et al. 2009).

Not only is there a lack of interaction between citizens and state, but the relationship has always been top-down and very hierarchical. Historian David Chandler (2008) observed that it is not Cambodian to challenge and criticise leaders, especially in public. Part of the reason was that power and wealth are perceived as coming from an individual's good karma in previous lives. Also influential was the prevailing acceptance of kinship and patronage in rural society, where duties and responsibilities of leaders were owed exclusively to one's group and clients rather than community as a whole (Ledgerwood and Vijghen 2002). Support, protection and favours require being part of the group and clientele network. Personal obligations and loyalty are expected and desired.

Recent studies reveal that patronage relations remain powerful and at the core of local politics today, much as they were before the war (Hughes 2003; Pak et al. 2007). Significantly, unlike before the war, the power of local authorities and patrons comes from outside the village, from powerful patrons more than from popular support and legitimacy. Although commune and district councillors have been elected directly and indirectly since 2002, the elections are based on a proportional party system. Those who aspire to be candidates must be loyal to the party and committed to the party line. In addition, commune and district officials play important roles in the CPP's working group structure, where they are expected to support higher party patrons by identifying needs and mobilising funds to deliver to the CPP's rural supporters (on CPP structure, see Pak 2011; Craig and Pak 2011). Both of these systems cement strong personal relationships between local authorities and party patrons.

Because of this, many local leaders continue to be CPP loyalists, old and male and have been working in commune administration since the fall of the Khmer Rouge (Rusten et al. 2004; Kim 2012). Villagers understand the personalisation of power in Cambodia and have adopted attitudes and strategies in their dealings with authorities through investing in personal relationships (Thon et al. 2009). They selectively interact and ask for help from authority figures they personally know and trust, not necessarily because of their official positions and titles. A villager interviewed in 2008 explained: “When there are issues, we dare approach only those (authorities) we feel warm towards and who treat us well. We know their heart. If not, we don’t go to them or interact with them because we don’t trust they will treat us fairly like their children” (Thon et al. 2009, 37).

A survey of voters in 2014 also found that 60 percent preferred to describe the state-citizen relationship as one between a father and child (Asia Foundation 2014: 34). Furthermore, despite heavy surveillance and coercive measures, there is considerable evidence of resistance and local agency. This includes everyday passive resistance such as addressing authorities by their official titles; not turning up to local meetings; not paying contributions to local development projects; and avoiding contact (Eng 2014). However, public resistance and open challenges to authority remain rare except where villagers’ livelihoods are severely threatened. Such rare show of public resistance is partly fear of officials’ resentment and partly dependence on the goodwill of local authorities for administrative services and as witnesses in important transactions like taking micro-finance loans and selling land.

Decentralisation reform

Social accountability is being promoted alongside the government’s decentralisation and deconcentration reform in which, through social accountability, citizens and civil society are to engage and make demands on commune and district governments. It is therefore important to understand the kind of power and authority these governments have in responding to local demands and their accountability relationship with constituents.

The government has implemented decentralisation since 2002 with significant funding from international donors. Studies have shown that, insofar as decentralisation has been implemented, it is closely linked with the roles of local authorities and the CPP’s surveillance mechanism, aiming to control the population and mobilise votes for the party rather than promoting accountability (Rusten et al. 2004; Blunt and Turner 2005; Pak 2011; Kim 2012).

This thinking is reflected in the way decentralisation has been implemented: commune and district governments have been deprived of resources and authority to deliver services and be accountable to local demands. First, the Law on Administration and Management of Communes and Sangkats 2001 and the Law on Administration and Management of Capital, Province, Khan and District 2008 give communes and districts greater responsibilities for local development and local affairs, and they are expected to play important roles in service delivery. But in reality, the deconcentration of service delivery functions, funds and personnel from central ministries has not been implemented.

Second, accountability is limited by features of the local election system. Currently, the CPP has secured 98 percent of all commune chief positions and 70 percent of council seats. District councils were elected in 2009 by commune councillors, again based on the party list system.

This arrangement allows the CPP to dominate district councils; fewer than 20 percent of the councillors came from other parties.

Local governments, especially commune councils, are put in a very difficult position. On the one hand, they are expected to represent villagers' interests and to be seen as helpful and responsive to villagers' complaints and demands. On the other, they have very little power over how public services are delivered because important decisions about resources and service delivery continue to be made by the national government (World Bank 2011). Local governments are caught in the middle: they are not supposed to take sides with their villagers, but they usually do and become confrontational with higher-ups in pursuing the interests of villagers. This has significant repercussions for the forms and potential outcomes of civil society engagement with local authority. Local governments might be more effective in promoting interests and responding to demands of villagers if they were given the resources and authority to do so.

There are signs after the 2013 national election that the government is under pressure and is looking into giving more resources and responsibilities to local governments under the recently adopted Implementation Plan for 2015-17. The plan promises to (1) transfer more resources, power and responsibility over service delivery to local governments and (2) strengthen downward accountability of local administration to villagers and increase the autonomy of local governments (Royal Government of Cambodia 2014, 2).

4. Urban clean water and solid waste services

This and the two subsequent chapters report on the empirical findings of three social accountability initiatives. All three chapters examine some broad questions in trying to explain how social accountability works in Cambodia, why it works the way it does and with what outcomes. Whereas each chapter looks at a particular social accountability initiative, the three chapters attempt to investigate three key accountability relationships. The first relationship focuses on the characteristics and nature of the service sector, explaining the state interest and motivation in responding to demands and needs of the poor. The chapters then study the dynamics of social accountability initiatives by investigating the origins of the project, the roles and interests of international donors and NGOs and their relations with the government and intended project beneficiaries. These relations define the attitudes and approaches undertaken and shape the design and potential outcomes of the projects. The final aspect examined is the power and motivations of citizen participants and their roles and expectations in the project. Also discussed are the ways in which citizens and state officials, particularly service providers and commune officials, engage with one another in these initiatives, and the outcomes of engagement.

In all three cases, external actors initiated the project and facilitated state-citizen engagement in addressing service problems. In all three cases, local collective pressure organised by concerned villagers is weak and does not play a prominent role in initiating and holding the state to account. In two of the three cases, the state took an interest in using the information collected from the community scorecard and citizen reports and made efforts to respond. In the other case, results from the initiative were not fed into the sector's ongoing decision making at all, reinforcing hopelessness among the poor. In none of the case studies did we observe the uptake of social accountability by the poor to organise and develop strategy to demand changes and obtain

redress. Instead, the most viable solution for the poor, after the project ended and the NGOs left, was still to be highly dependent on powerful backers and the goodwill of authorities.

This chapter looks at a donor-financed and -initiated social accountability project in clean water and solid waste management in an urban district near Phnom Penh. The project was a regional initiative implemented simultaneously in Cambodia and Bangladesh based on lessons and approaches used in successful social accountability movements in Varanasi municipality, the most populated city in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India. In Varanasi, the poor from different religions and classes were well organised into citizen groups, and when necessary took to the streets to demand that their local and state governments provide clean water, electricity and waste collection. Their movements forced the government to put in place a redress and grievance mechanism and a citizen charter, and organised citizens to hold the city government accountable. Through the social accountability project, the same tools were copied in Cambodia, but they remained on paper because there was no enthusiasm for participation among the poor or authorities to make use of the tools. Thus, little change was observed in terms of empowerment of the poor to demand accountability from the state and improved public services.

Accountability of the clean water and solid waste sector

Cambodia has a large number of people living without access to safe drinking water or sanitation. Nearly half of Cambodians do not have access to safe drinking water, and an alarming 80 percent lack access to basic sanitation services (Royal Government of Cambodia 2012, 2). There is also a stark contrast between urban and rural, and between rich and poor. People in urban areas have three times more access to sanitation as those in rural and peri-urban areas (UNICEF n.d.). The rich have 22 times more access to piped water than the poor. Both of these indicators reflect a general lack of investment and attention by the national government in providing the poor in rural and peri-urban areas with access to piped water and sanitation. The decentralisation that began in 2002 in communes and in 2009 in district and provinces has not granted them any authority or resources for water supply and sanitation. In effect, these decentralised units have contributed little to the provision of water and sanitation services. In fact, much of the investment for water and sanitation comes from international donors: aid disbursement grew from USD18 million in 2006 to USD56 million in 2014 (Royal Government of Cambodia 2014, 2).

Water supply in Phnom Penh and surrounding areas is the responsibility of the Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority (PPWSA), a state agent that is financially and institutionally autonomous. It has the authority to make decisions about personnel, investment, financial management and outreach programmes without having to go through the lengthy and cumbersome administrative and hierarchical processes as well as the political interference a typical state institution faces. This autonomy enabled PPWSA to expand its service coverage in Phnom Penh quickly, from 25 percent in 1993 to 92 percent in 2010 (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phnom_Penh_Water_Supply_Authority). PPWSA is known in Cambodia and elsewhere as a successful public institution exhibiting good governance. However, Phnom Penh accounts for only 10 percent of the total population.

Decisions on new pipe system investments are made by the executive director of PPWSA with no input from local authorities or concerned communities. This suggests that decisions are highly top-down and lack local participation. However, in 1999 PPWSA established a programme called Clean Water for Low-income Families with significant financial support

from aid donors, particularly the World Bank. Through this programme, it provided water connections to 30,577 poor families from 1999 to 2013 (PPWSA 2013, 3). But many poor villagers in remote and poor communities continue to lack piped water, and continue to rely on private water suppliers at a much higher cost. A report on water supply and sanitation services in Takhmao found that of the 150 poor households surveyed, only 28.67 percent had piped water (Silaka 2012, 44).

Sanitation is much more complex than piped water, and so far concrete results have been limited. This is partly due to lack of coordination and capacity of the responsible national ministries (Rural Development, Health, Environment and Mines and Industry) and partly due to lack of investment and government attention. Solid waste management is the responsibility of the Ministry of Environment. Solid waste collection and management are usually provided by private companies directed by the powerful Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF) without the involvement of local authorities.

In the case of Takhmao municipality, a private company owned by Mr Chan Dara has been awarded a 28-year contract by the MEF to deliver solid waste services. No details of the service provisions in the contract have been revealed to commune councils or the public (interview with sangkat chief, sangkat A, Takhmao, 19 August 2014). Conversations with Mr Chan Dara revealed that his company had only four large and two small trucks to service the whole city; its actual capacity can serve only the areas around the prime minister's residence and the central town (interview with Mr Chan Dara, Takhmao town, 20 August 2014). Remote and rural areas of Takhmao municipality are not served.

Asked if he planned to expand coverage, he frankly admitted that his company cannot cover all areas and households unless the government or donors donate new trucks. He complained that his business is not making a good profit, and for this reason he cannot buy more trucks or employ more people. He said that even if he had the capital to expand services to poor areas, his company would not be able to collect fees because poor households do not have the capacity or willingness to pay. This claim is not supported by Silaka, which found that poor households are willing to pay for services (Silaka 2012).

There is neither pressure nor incentive from the government for him to expand coverage. In fact, the MEF requires him to spend about USD20,000 a year on road repairs. This suggests that the government has prioritised road construction over solid waste collection due to roads' obvious political gain and contribution to development. For Mr Chan Dara, it is very important to maintain good relations with the ministry because waste collection is only one aspect of the business interests he has secured from the government. He owns and operates several petrol stations in Kandal province. He also has government contracts to collect *pheasi* (user fees) at local markets managed by his children.

In both cases, decisions about service provision are made by national level actors without feedback from local people. The accountability of service providers to the people and to the poor in particular is very weak because decision making remains highly centralised and there is significant reluctance by the state authority to be held accountable by citizens. We would therefore expect to find these actors less receptive and cooperative in the social accountability project and hence a hindrance to achieving potential outcomes.

The project

The water and sanitation social accountability project was funded by the United Nations Democracy Fund from March 2011 to March 2013 under the Deepening Local Democratic Governance through Social Accountability in Asia project. The project was implemented in Bangladesh and Cambodia. A New Delhi-based organisation called Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), which is known for its pioneer work on social accountability in India, provided technical assistance in both countries. Silaka, a Cambodian NGO based in Phnom Penh, was contracted to implement the project in Cambodia. Silaka provides training in organisational development and advocates good governance and human rights. It was created in 1997 after a forerunner, the Cambodian-American Volunteer Project, ended. Silaka collaborated with a local community development NGO named Khmer Association for Development (KAD) to implement the social accountability project in Takhmao.

The project was implemented in two sangkats in Takhmao municipality, a city about 12 km from Phnom Penh. The two sangkats were selected for being the poorest and most lacking in access to piped water and sanitation services among the six sangkats in the municipality. Takhmao is also the home of Prime Minister Hun Sen, and Silaka expected that working to improve water and sanitation service there would mobilise high level political backing, a key to enhancing participation and responsiveness of service providers and authorities and hence the success of the project. In reality, the project was viewed with scepticism by officials at various levels and did not receive the hoped for commitment and engagement.

The project set out to strengthen local governance on democratic principles through the use of social accountability tools. It was expected to achieve four goals:

- improve capacities of marginalised and poor citizens to engage and make demands on the state for better services;
- enhance capacities of local authorities to respond and integrate social accountability principles into their work;
- strengthen capacities of local civil society organisations to engage and work well with authorities in promoting principles of good governance;
- inform and institutionalise social accountability values into national policy and decision making.

Implementation: actors and their relationship

According to Silaka, implementation had a rocky start. Despite having secured endorsement from the minister of interior for the project, a prerequisite for NGOs working with local authorities, Silaka and the local authority remained suspicious of each other and uncooperative. This difficult relationship constrained Silaka from implementing the project as planned, and in some circumstances Silaka had to refrain from doing things as envisioned. At every stage, the project was subjected to time-consuming consultation and administrative approval. A Silaka officer admitted that “it took them 15 months to get the project moving” (interview with Mr Chhay Pitou, governance officer of Silaka, Phnom Penh, 31 July 2014). An independent evaluation found that the lack of cooperation from authorities slowed the project and contributed to it working less well, a factor that was neglected by designers (Lorenzoni 2014, 21).

The project had difficulty mobilising villagers to take part. Silaka hoped to recruit a wide range of participants who could make demands and mobilise other villagers. As it turned out, representatives and members of the project's neighbourhood committees were mostly elderly women and individuals with strong links to local authorities. Silaka told us that it was extremely difficult to recruit villagers to work with them because they had to go through local authorities (interview with Mr Chhay Pitou). We found out in our interviews with representatives of neighbourhood committees that they were either related to local authorities or currently working for them. For instance, two of the youth representatives' mothers worked as assistants for the village authority. Three other representatives we interviewed were village chiefs and are relatives of commune chiefs. The village representatives included only people approved by the commune and excluded those not getting along well or critical of the authority. The interview with the Silaka officer also revealed that only three of the 10 neighbourhood committees were active until the end of the project; three committees did not survive until the end of the project and the other four existed but were not active.

Mobilisation of villagers to participate in capacity building and various activities of the projects also faced difficulty. Some were afraid to take part in the activities organised by Silaka. For instance, Silaka wanted village representatives to collect as many thumbprints as possible from villagers and submit them directly to PPWSA without approval from the local authority. Both villagers and their representatives told us they were afraid to do this; instead they consulted with and got approval from the commune on how to do it and who should be on the list (group interviews with neighbourhood representatives and villagers, Sangkat B, Takhmao, 10 August 2014).

Some villagers were not interested in the project because they were sceptical about changing the existing situation (interview with three well-off families, Sangkat B, Takhmao, 11 August 2014). One woman pointed out that her family was willing to pay PPWSA to provide water through a direct connection but was rejected due to the structure of the roads in that community. Other villagers who wanted to access these services and were keen to take part in the project were not approached by Silaka or the neighbourhood committee (poor, new migrants and opposition party supporters). Some of the poorest families, even when invited, chose not to participate because they would not be able to afford the services when they became available (interviews with poorest households Sangkat B, Takhmao, 12 August 2014).

This general reluctance and scepticism among villagers was very problematic for the project and for Silaka in generating public support that could be used to influence state decisions. Large scale training involved an invitation to women living close to the village representatives (whereas villagers living far from them and/or not getting along with them, including members of opposition parties, were excluded) to listen to Silaka and KAD facilitators teaching them about water and sanitation issues. Our interviews with women in both communes who participated in the training indicated they now know better how to boil water for drinking and how to separate organic matter and recycle wastes, an important contribution to public health but not at all related to citizen capacity to engage and hold public officials accountable.

Public support was demonstrated in two very low-key and small-scale motorcycle parades with banners stating citizen rights for water and sanitation and their right under the constitution. Participants in the parades, we were told by village representatives in July 2014, were villagers paid by the project to take part.

A key activity involved developing a citizen report card in which perceptions of villagers about the quality and quantity of services were collected in order to inform service providers of the state of services received by villagers. The exercise was conducted by Silaka working with KAD and PRIA through village representatives who collected the data. Silaka and PRIA then prepared the report in English and translated it into Khmer. The process was time-consuming and because the project had got off to a slow start, there was only a baseline report published quite late in the project cycle in 2012. Villagers we interviewed were not aware of the report or what was in it. Similarly, only half of the representatives we met had a copy of the report, and they could not explain what was in it.

This state of affairs further undermined the interaction between citizens and authorities. The report was supposed to be the basis of public forums or meetings at which information about service performance was to be shared regularly from villagers to service providers and local authorities. In reality, interaction between authorities and citizens took place quite late in the cycle, and only four such meetings were held in a tightly controlled atmosphere, facilitated by Silaka rather than by village representatives. In each of these meetings, village representatives and commune chiefs were given opportunities to report in front of the municipal governor and representatives from PPWSA and the solid waste collection company about the situation in their villages and communes. Village representatives who stood up and asked questions often in the meetings were told to keep quiet. A commune chief was irritated by constant demands from Silaka for the commune to come up with a concrete plan to address the demand from its villagers. He told Silaka to find its own funding and implement the project itself.

These public meetings provided the service providers with information about where villagers wanted the services. Our interviews with service providers suggested that they are already aware of the areas their services cover or do not cover. PPWSA and the waste company explained to me that in order to meet local demands, they require capital to invest and the willingness of villagers to pay their fees. During the 2012 public meetings, PPWSA promised to expand its existing coverage in the requested communities before the end of 2013. When pressed by village representatives and Silaka to speed up services to these communities in a subsequent meeting, PPWSA said that there was nothing it could do because the extension of new pipes and connections depends on their existing investment plan and available capital as well as the water pressure in the areas.

The waste company owner told participants that the company wanted to expand its business and make profits. However, it could not expand to areas that are remote from main roads and have a small number of users because it would not generate profits. He also complained that his business was not making money because many households used the service but did not pay the fees. Because of this, he asked the municipality and commune authorities to help him mobilise resources to buy new trucks.

Outcomes

Assessing outcomes requires examination of the extent to which the project contributed to addressing the concerns discussed above: whether the initiative gave more power to citizens in their interactions with authority; whether social accountability led to changes in service provision; and whether it improved engagement between NGOs and the state.

Empowerment

In both communes, the project achieved little in empowerment for villagers. The organised neighbourhood committees, which Silaka hoped would become key actors, ceased to exist as soon as the project ended in early 2013. Only one of six representatives we interviewed would play that role again if approached by an NGO. Some of the representatives said that the skills gained from the project could be very useful but they were unable to use those skills because they remained fearful of authorities. One female representative explained: “I learned a lot from the project but I can only use about 30 percent because I am still scared of authority to the point of life and death.” A male representative felt that “I had better stop complaining now that I have no support from an NGO. My and other villagers’ efforts are likely to be fruitless because our initiative lacks backing by a powerful actor.” This feeling of impotence was widespread among the villagers we interviewed.

Nonetheless, the use of public forums offers some opportunities for public pressure on service providers. Village representatives interviewed realised that the familiar approach of mere collection and presentation of thumbprints to authority has not been an effective way to press for change. The public forums facilitated by the project produced some promises from service providers. One of them explained: “Although my participation in the project has not resulted in the improved services we want, my voice in the public meetings has triggered promises. In contrast, we have never received a response from authorities through submission of thumbprints” (interview with housewife as village representative, Sangkat B, 11 August 2014). Public meetings were more effective because authorities felt pressure when they were in the spotlight. Unfortunately, the accountability ends there. There has been no further opportunity for village representatives to follow up progress and ensure that promises are realised. None of the mechanisms used during the project have been institutionalised in local governance.

Change in services

More than a year after the project had ended, the situation regarding poor people’s access to water and sanitation services in the two communes in many aspects was unchanged (Lorenzoni 2014, 24). Thirty-seven households in Sangkat B had access to solid waste services in 2013, but only 27 stayed with the project at the time of our fieldwork in July 2014. In this commune, several households interviewed complained that the service fee was expensive and that they wanted piped water rather solid waste services because well water was not of drinking quality. The expansion of solid waste services to these households was due to the location of the village on National Road 2. In Sangkat A, the villagers we met had observed no change.

We found that a change in the water system in Sangkat A in early 2014 was not a result of the social accountability project, but of effective use of patronage networks by a high ranking official living in the commune. A senior tax official worked with a retired school principal (who also owns a lot of land and a house along the road) to collect villagers’ signatures with which they were able to press for urgent support from senior officials at PPWSA in Phnom Penh who are connected with the tax official. Some poor households living along the road benefitted from this. None of the interviewed households along the road were aware of Silaka’s accountability project, only of the powerful individual’s initiative. No new water system was observed in Sangkat B. Both of these examples suggest that the social accountability platform lacked real influence and was not effective, particularly when compared to the existing patronage accountability.

Government and NGO relations

In our interviews with commune and village chiefs, none showed much enthusiasm for working with Silaka in the project. While thanking Silaka for selecting him to attend a study tour in India, a commune chief complained, “It is not right for Madame Thyda [director of Silaka] to pressure me and the municipality to come up with a concrete plan for when the government will meet the demands of the villagers” (interview with commune chief, Sangkat A, Takhmao, 19 August 2014). Similarly, service providers do not see themselves as accountable to NGO demands. The owner of the solid waste company rejected Silaka’s call for action. He said: “I don’t think Silaka has the right to demand that I respond. I hear them. But it is up to me and the government whether we can and will respond to the demands” (interview with Mr Chan Dara, Takhmao town, 20 August 2014). The power of Silaka to implement the project as envisioned was constrained by two factors. First, Silaka was unable to access a decision-making process that could genuinely influence government decisions. Second, Silaka was reluctant to be seen as engaging in politics for fear of losing government endorsement of the project. Thus it lost opportunities to mobilise public support and opened itself to criticism that it cared only about the survival of the project rather than representing the interests of the villagers.

Conclusion

The social accountability initiative examined in this chapter had little impact on empowerment, state-society relations and change in services for at least three major reasons. First, the way the project was designed and implemented did not enable villagers to exercise significant power over the state nor give them confidence to scrutinise and make claims against the state. This situation can link directly to the government idea that public criticisms and dissidents are not tolerated but considered as threats to public order and security. The case study shows that villagers are reluctant to express views that authorities might not approve. They depend on powerful actors (NGOs, donors, local or national elites) to empower them in seeking influence over public policies and decisions. This form of dependency does not award power to the villagers; power remains firmly in the hands of individuals with political connections or elites far removed from the grassroots.

Second, lack of local authorities’ cooperation constrained the NGOs from implementing projects as envisioned. The NGOs were unable to mobilise villagers to organise themselves in a manner that could influence change. While the government finds it acceptable for villagers to channel their voices upward through mechanisms like the commune or the party structure, they are extremely uncomfortable with NGOs mobilising villagers to make claims. Interference by NGOs in local political affairs is tightly controlled because local authorities are afraid things could get out of hand. This is an important issue because, in the literature, distrust between the state and NGOs can be reduced by a social accountability approach. The question then is whether local authorities’ experience working with NGOs could over time soften the view that NGOs are a threat. We will examine this question in the concluding chapter.

Third, the local focus of engagement in the project by powerful national officials prevents the promotion of social accountability being taken seriously by local officials and front-line service providers. The independent evaluation noted that “the project was unknown and invisible to the major players in the areas of local democratic governance and social accountability” (Lorenzoni 2014, 23). This gave the signal to citizens that their efforts could affect few changes, given

that decisions concerning these services are far removed from the power of local authorities. Because of this, social accountability failed to “turn on the alarm” and generate pressures upon the state that could compel it to act differently.

5. School textbooks monitoring initiative

The new government formed after the 2013 national election acknowledges the deplorable state of education and has shown commitment to reform, as reflected in a number of developments. First, the government has substantially increased the budget allocation for education, from USD280 million in 2013 to USD335 million in 2014 (“Education to Receive 20% Boost in 2014 Budget”, *Cambodia Daily*, 29 October 2013). Nonetheless, this funding remains low compared to countries with similar economic conditions in the region. Second, the government has appointed a senior CPP official, who is now known as a reform champion, as minister of Education, Youth and Sport. Third, the new minister, with the backing of the prime minister, has implemented some drastic reforms. He has eliminated systematic corruption and cheating in high school exams. As a result, only 25.7 percent of candidates passed high school exams in 2014 (“Second Chance Awaits 75% Who Failed Exam”, *Cambodia Daily*, 30 August 2014). The new minister has also demonstrated a high level of commitment and willingness to improve and change ways of doing things within the ministry.

This recent development within education provides an enabling environment and sets the context for the social accountability initiative examined in this chapter. This is a NGO-led initiative called “Feedback for Improving the Quality of Education”, which focuses on identifying and exposing policy loopholes and the sources of textbook leakages, was implemented by the Khmer Institute for National Development (KIND). This chapter investigates the textbook tracing project, paying particular attention to the project’s contribution to empowering parents and students in their relationship with school and education officials, to influencing changes in service provision and to promoting community collective action beyond the project’s lifespan. As there already is strong national political will for improved accountability within education, we expect increased willingness on the part of the ministry to cooperate with NGOs in the social accountability projects, and in using the evidence gathered by the projects to respond to public demands and improve this important social service.

Accountability in education

Education is Cambodia’s largest service delivery area in personnel and budget allocation. In 2014, public funding for education was 16.3 percent of government expenditure (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport 2014b, 49). It employs 106,621 people (of whom 88,818 are teaching staff) and manages 11,865 schools (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport 2014a, 1). The ministry has made significant progress over the last decade in raising enrolment rates; however, a persistent high level of dropouts means that fewer than half of enrolled children finish primary school. Cambodia has the lowest literacy rate in the region, 87.5 percent for the population aged 15 to 45 years (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport 2014b).

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport is responsible for the overall education system, quality, policies and regulations. Under the ministry are provincial departments and district offices of education. They are expected to support and work with the ministry to ensure that

plans, policies and regulations are implemented and observed by schools. The district office in particular plays very important roles because it works directly with schools over policy compliance and also provides technical support and oversight. The schools in turn implement national policy and plans, and educate students. Although there have been attempts to deconcentrate functions and responsibilities within the sector, decision making remains highly centralised. For instance, the school development plan, which is a key document developed by each school, requires checking and reviewing by district and province authorities and then final approval by the ministry in Phnom Penh. Little discretion is left to schools in managing their funds, personnel and day-to-day activities. A study by the World Bank found that the current centralised system constrained schools' performance. For instance, because decisions over staff are not within the authority of schools, school principals were left powerless to remove under-performing staff despite consistent calls for intervention and discipline from higher levels (World Bank 2013, 38).

That study also revealed another key challenge related to the dysfunction of existing accountability mechanisms. One of these mechanisms is the school support committee, which is responsible for promoting community participation. The committee is expected to monitor activities, review the budget and check on quality. It also has authority to approve the school development plan before the school sends it to higher levels. The school support committee is made up of members of the community, who can be commune chief, village head, elders, school principal, teachers, villagers, students and parents. In practice, membership usually consists of local authorities and elites appointed by school principals. The committees rarely engage in discussion of substantive matters regarding the curriculum, staff, budget management and quality control. Where commune councillors are members of the committee, they have not taken the role seriously and are very reluctant to represent the interests of villagers, fearing to interfere with the decisions of the ministry (World Bank 2013, 37). Commune councillors also feel that the committee has little influence because many decisions are made, not by the school, but by higher bodies remote from the commune. Because of this, there is little formal interaction between commune councils and schools. Nonetheless, where there are "serious and obvious breaches of teacher behaviours", parents confront school principals directly to solve the problems or approach local authorities for help, but not the school support committee (World Bank 2013, 37). In sum, there has not been an effective channel for public feedback in education. The school support committee is only a rubber stamp, despite its significant contribution to fundraising for school infrastructure development (World Bank 2013).

Another concern is the high level of informal payments imposed on students and parents in public schools, and the problematic procurement of school materials, including delivery of textbooks. This is partly the reason why many students, particularly poor students, are pressured to quit school (NGO Education Partnership 2007). Various informal payments are collected daily from students and their families. The most obvious is the requirement for students to attend the private tutoring provided, sometimes during official school hours in the same classrooms and by the same teachers. Fees are also demanded for students to have access to textbooks, although these are supposed to be provided by the state free of charge.

In 2014, the government spent USD5 million to procure 5 million textbooks (interview with chief of Office of Planning and Textbook Distribution, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, Phnom Penh, 26 January 2015). The citizen report card conducted by KIND in 2013 revealed that the student-textbook ratios are 1 to 1 for 31.38 percent of students and 2 to 1 for 59.18 percent, while the remaining students had to share each book with two or more other students

(KIND 2014, 23). Delivery of textbooks is often late and does not correspond with the needs of the schools. Only 39 percent of schools receive the books on time in early October, the rest getting them in November or December. There is no proper record of the numbers delivered from each level of government. Even when books are delivered, they are not distributed to students free of charge. Textbooks marked “not for sale” are widely available in the market.

More broadly, there was no clear delineation of responsibilities among key actors in producing and delivering textbooks. The school development plan, including textbook demand, is developed at the school and approved by the school support committee, then submitted to the District Office of Education (DOE) and Provincial Department of Education (PDE). Once it has the development plans from all PDEs, the Department of Curriculum Development (DCD) develops an annual budget for textbooks. Within this budget, the Publishing and Distribution House (PDH) is responsible for publishing and delivering textbooks to all schools. PDE and DOE are responsible for monitoring the delivery and checking the receipt of textbooks signed for by the schools. However, the Public Expenditure Tracking Survey (PETS) reports that in practice the PDH does not follow this procedure thoroughly, which may lead to textbook leakage (KIND 2013). According to this report, 70 percent of studied schools collect books from the DOE and pay the transport cost themselves, while the rest get the books directly from the PDH. In some cases, school principals are asked to sign official receipts for textbooks before they get them, but the number they receive is less than shown on the receipt. This demonstrates the lack of accountability in textbook production and delivery.

The social accountability project

KIND, in collaboration with Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in East Asia and the Pacific (ANSA-EAP), implemented a two-and-half year social accountability project called “Feedback for Improving the Quality of Education” between 2012 and 2014, funded by USAID-Building Bridges for Better Spending in Southeast Asia.

KIND is a relatively new NGO, founded in 2003. Its key areas are promotion of good governance in public institutions and participation of youth and marginalised citizens in public policy and decision making. KIND’s collaborator in this textbook monitoring project, ANSA-EAP was created with funding from the World Bank in 2008 as “a networking facility under the aegis of the Ateneo University School of Government to contribute to promoting the ‘social accountability’ approach to good governance in East Asia and Pacific region” (Liamzon 2012,16). In Cambodia, ANSA-EAP has engaged in a number of social accountability projects and capacity building activities under the World Bank-funded Demand for Good Governance project. In this project, ANSA-EAP provided technical advice and resource persons to assist and support KIND.

The overall objective was to promote good governance and the right to quality education through social accountability. It incorporated these objectives:

- Review the existing law, policy and development plan of MOEYS related to the Education Sector Support Programme.
- Conduct research on national budget transactions for the publication of textbooks through a public expenditure tracking survey (PETS).

- Study the result of textbook distribution by MOEYS in the city and three provinces through the citizen report card (CRC) and social audit.
- Advocate improving education through public problem solving, stakeholder engagement and media.
- Increase civic engagement and promote social accountability as a concept.

The project's expected outcomes were: (1) improved access, quality and delivery of textbooks for upper secondary schools; (2) institutionalisation of social accountability tools in education; and (3) empowerment of the community to engage directly with state actors.

These outcomes were to be achieved through using social accountability tools including PETS, CRC, social audit and evidence-based advocacy. The project's approach towards state-society relations was influenced by the World Bank's principle of constructive engagement. Constructive engagement, as explained in the project document (Khmer Institute for National Development 2014b), entailed organising meetings in which civil society actors had the opportunity to discuss their concerns and demands with national officials in a friendly and constructive manner. The project also focused on the national level, mainly the Ministry of Education. There was almost no coordination or interaction with the ministry's provincial and district offices, nor was there participation from local government, schools or school support committees.

Implementation

From January to February 2013, KIND used PETS, a budget tracking tool, to investigate the flow of textbooks from PDH in Phnom Penh to schools across the country. It aimed to identify how textbooks leaked to the market. The surveys were conducted from national level to front-line service providers, including representatives from DCD, PDH, school principals, commune councillors and teachers in charge of textbook management. Thirty-three schools in Phnom Penh, Kompong Cham, Kompong Speu and Kampot were invited to participate in this investigation.

From June to September 2013, KIND used another social accountability tool, CRC, to investigate textbook distribution from schools to students and collect feedback and recommendations from students. Four hundred and eighty-nine students in the 33 schools were selected randomly for interviews to assess their satisfaction with textbooks in academic year 2012/13; 54 percent were female. Around 90 percent of these students were from medium living standard families, 9 percent from poor and 1 percent from rich families.

The results of PETS and CRC were disseminated through a media campaign. Those results were used as evidence to advocate that the government address those issues. The PETS results were released in December 2013 through a joint declaration between KIND and ANSA-EAP, followed by dissemination of the CRC in February 2014.

KIND also organised four public forums: one in Phnom Penh and three in different provinces, between May and June 2014, to present the findings of PET and CRC, foster discussion and find solutions for better governance. The participants in these forums included officers from MOEYS, city or provincial departments of education and district offices of education, upper secondary schoolteachers, students and parents.

To promote public awareness and disseminate the results of each stage of the project, KIND also held a weekly radio programme called *Social Mirror, We Demand*. This invited guest speakers from the government and NGOs, as well as teachers and students, to discuss various topics such as education policy and activities of MOEYS. Furthermore, KIND conducted campaigns to advocate policy reform on textbook provision. These included a Facebook campaign that gained 23,495 likes and 4750 shares, and messages printed on T-shirts and tuk-tuk billboards. It was expected that those campaigns would foster public awareness of textbook management and hold the government more accountable to users.

Outcomes

As mentioned above, this project was implemented in the context of high political opportunities in education under a new minister who had already taken steps to address problems. In effect, the project had already secured an enthusiastic audience. At the same time, participants, mainly upper secondary school students, were highly motivated, with the potential to act as influential promoters of the agenda KIND was advocating. To a great extent, this explains the government response in addressing some problems identified by the project. However, other claims of success require closer examination, particularly the extent of the contribution to improving governance and promoting citizens' right to hold government accountable.

Textbook provision and governance

From the outset, this project seemed to achieve significant results. The director of KIND claimed that it resulted in a number of MOEYS policy actions under the new minister, who was described as “completely different to the previous minister who often rejected NGOs’ findings” (interview with director of KIND, Phnom Penh, 8 September 2014). After the release of PETS and CRC, the minister made three changes. First, the ministry issued a warning to stop the illegal sale of state textbooks. Second, the ministry cooperated with the Ministry of Interior to clamp down on the illegal sale of state textbooks. Third, the ministry created a working group to manage textbook development and reinforce textbook distribution and usage at every school. This working group has held several meetings to find a solution to the illegal sale of state textbooks.

It is not clear how effective these measures have been in gaining compliance from officials, given that there was little enthusiasm from lower officials for complying and participating in the project. KIND found ministry officials helpful. For instance, DCD acknowledged the problems and supported the project. The director of KIND said that KIND was supported by DCD to develop the questionnaire for PETS and CRC and to implement the project (interview, Phnom Penh, 8 September 2014). An official at DCD said that KIND’s project had a stronger voice than he did to attract the attention of ministry decision makers (interview with chief of Office of Planning and Textbook Distribution, MOEYS, Phnom Penh, 26 January 2015).

By contrast, KIND told us that state provincial and district actors were not willing to join the project. A school director in Kampot province explained: “The ministry can detect the districts where state books have been leaked to the market because each textbook has a code indicating which district the book belongs to” (interview with school director in Kampot, 27 October 2014). He added, “The participants of the meeting [organised by KIND] agreed that the provincial and district offices should be responsible for leakage.” However, the director

of a PDE rejected the claim, saying there is no evidence to show that books are leaked at the province or district. He mentioned that textbooks being printed with district codes do not tell us where they leak: it can be at the publishing house in Phnom Penh, province, district, school or even the library.

There was little interest from state institutions in social auditing, which involved discussions with parents, students and teachers about the problems they face. The final project report acknowledged “resistance from government officials in participating or responding to the information obtained in the PETS, CRC and Social Audit reports” (KIND 2014, 13, 18, 23). Provincial and district officials told us that they attended the public meetings, not because they wanted to hear the discussion, but because they were ordered by the ministry to participate. We will discuss this point again in the section on state-NGO relations.

A similar feeling can be observed in schools. A school principal in Phnom Penh felt very insecure about the project and complained to us that a group of teachers who dislike him might use the students in this project to have him dismissed (interview with school principal, Phnom Penh, 1 October 2014).

In another school in Kampot province, the principal was cooperative and helpful because the school had no problem with book leakage. Our interviews with students who did and did not participate in the project indicated that their school did not have a textbook shortage. The principal mentioned that the school deliberately overestimates the number of students in its school development plan; therefore, he can request more books than the school needs. This is also a model school in the province and as such receives more resources and support from the ministry and donor projects. Due to its good performance, the school has just received a new secondary resource centre, which has a computer laboratory, library, meeting room, staff rooms, science laboratory and other facilities.

This evidence suggests that concrete improvement in textbook provision and changes in practices and attitudes among national and local MOEYS officials remain difficult to pin down. This is mainly because there are multiple actors involved in textbook provision but also because the project engaged only high-ranking ministry officials, facilitating deflection and pointing of fingers at other actors and levels. The evidence gathered by the project has not led to officials taking responsibility and accepting accountability. Nor are there mechanisms for community collective feedback and complaints.

Empowerment

Empowerment of students and parents in monitoring and oversight of public school performance was a key aspect of the project (interview with director of KIND, Phnom Penh, 8 September 2014). This requires examining the extent to which the project created an environment for students and parents to express their concerns and needs without fear, and the extent to which these expressed needs were met by the school and education system. Our interviews with participants and non-participants of the project showed that they were very interested in participating in social accountability activities and wanted the project to bring positive change to the schools. Their interest reflected their awareness of their right to free education and of the obligation of the state.

A female student whose family depends on her father, a motor taxi driver, said she decided to join the project because she wanted to make changes for herself and the younger generation.

She told us she drew her inspiration for social activism from other young Cambodians who took part in the post-election movement and felt that she too had to be brave and speak up (interview with female student in grade 11, Phnom Penh, 30 September 2014). She was helping KIND to mobilise other students in the textbook monitoring project. She and some of her friends participated in the project enthusiastically and believed that they could make genuine positive change for their school and community. Parents involved in the project were also highly motivated and showed strong commitment to it. The father of a student in Phnom Penh said that he joined the project because he hoped that it would bring improvement to his children's school and the education sector as a whole. Another parent told us:

The public meeting is a rare platform that allows citizens to discuss education issues with state officials at all levels. I really wanted to join this project and I also encourage my daughter to engage in it. If she faces problems at school as a result of joining, I will enrol her in another school. Other parents also dared to express their difficulty because they have to pay a lot of money for their children to study in public school. If we don't speak up, the state will not know our difficulties and the problems will remain unsolved. (Interview with father of a student in grade 12, Phnom Penh, 1 October 2014)

Despite their enthusiasm for participating, there was a strong sense of reluctance and fear of being marked out by the school and higher officials when revealing their dissatisfaction with schools at the public meetings. This is also identified in KIND's final report as the most challenging part of the project: "[I]t was evident that there was some fear from students and teachers in speaking out, which manifested into an unwillingness to participate and voice concerns. A lack of feedback and participation, however, would have crippled the application of this Social Accountability tool" (KIND 2014, 13). Findings from our fieldwork suggest three reasons for their reluctance and fear of confronting state officials.

First, participants are made aware by school officials that their open criticism is not acceptable. Some participating students told us they "feel uncomfortable after expressing concerns at the public meetings". The school principal and some teachers were no longer friendly to them. In one school in Phnom Penh, we were told the principal called the participating students to his office after their presence at one of the public forums. The principal accused them of expanding a small problem into a big problem. They were told that a lot of problems needed to be solved, such as flooding and lack of classrooms, and that they should have raised this to get funds rather than criticising the school about textbook shortage and informal fees (interview with a group of students, Phnom Penh, 30 September 2014). He likely considered constructive engagement as related to financial or technical support, not exposing negatives at his school to the NGO or outsiders. To show that he listens to them and solves their problems, he promised to recruit a new librarian and to return textbook fees to the students. As in the case study in Chapter 4, officials want to be seen as helpful and responding to citizens' problems, but they do not like interference from NGOs.

Second, there was a real and perceived threat to participants from the school. One of the biggest constraints on poor and weak actors voicing their views is the fear of reprisal for speaking up in a context of impunity. The female student discussed above was told by the school that she was not allowed to enrol for the next academic year. The excuse provided was that she had not returned textbooks to the library, but the real reason was her participation in the project's public meetings. With intervention from another school principal, she was allowed to enrol but is now on the school's blacklist, treated with suspicion by the principal and a small group of teachers (interview with female student in grade 11, Phnom Penh, 28 January 2015).

Third, there is a strong feeling among students and parents that they do not have sufficient power to pressure public officials to respond to their needs, so they feel dependent on the project and NGOs to back them. There is no collective mechanism they can partner with to pursue their demands or hold public officials accountable. There is also no plan of action generated by the project. Now that the project has finished and KIND has left them, all interviewed students and parents said that they have no idea what they should do further. These quotes from a parent and a student reflect this hopelessness:

We don't know what we can do if the problems [high parking fee and textbook shortage] remain unsolved. KIND never contacts us after the meeting and we never go to school too ... I hope KIND will update this project, and I would be happy to join the project again. (Father of a student in grade 12, Phnom Penh, 1 October 2014)

My school doesn't have a problem with textbook shortage ... In the meeting at DOE, we asked the ministry to provide materials such as books, computers, chairs and tables for our resource centre. I don't know what KIND has done to solve the problem, as I joined the meeting only once. If we don't get what we request, I don't know what else we can do. I hope the school will request school supplies from the PDE and the ministry. (Interview with student in grade 11, Kampot, 28 October 2014)

School management teams also feel they have no leverage to hold higher government accountable. A school director in Kampot said that he cannot do anything to address textbook shortages and delayed delivery if the ministry does not act:

I have not observed any concrete solution resulting from this project. Right now we haven't received the books yet, so delivery is still late. I hope that the ministry looks into the problem and pays attention to changing the situation. KIND doesn't give me any update on this project. I don't know what I can do as a school principal. I have learned textbook management in Thailand and the Philippines during the workshop in this project, but I don't know how I can apply this experience because Cambodia is different. (Interview with school director, Kampot, 27 October 2014)

We found in our fieldwork that while there are face-to-face meetings between society actors and state officials to exchange views about issues related to textbooks, the overall response from officials is to promise to solve the problems, but that these problems are beyond their authority. In other words, there was almost a complete absence of state officials accepting accountability. For example, PDH explained that the textbook shortage is due to the limited funds allocated by government, and that textbook delivery is late due to the late transfer of funds from the MEF, so publishing is late and delivery is also late. Project participants could not do anything but accept the explanation; they were unable to question the response because they were reluctant to confront public officials. In many aspects, the public meetings did not cause public officials to investigate further and verify the complaints, nor generate a clear course of action for students and parents.

Our interviews with students and parents suggest that there is motivation and interest to take active roles in the project and to conduct oversight of public schools. However, the project failed to recognise that parents, students and teachers feared reprisals for participating and openly criticising public officials. Because of this neglect, the project failed to ensure the anonymity and collective voice that could empower participants to become actively involved in school governance. Also, project activities and information and public meeting agenda focused on discussing problems between state actors and project participants in a friendly manner rather

than on generating a clear and substantial plan to enable social collective actions. Because of this, students and parents could not exert their power over state actors nor did they know what to do after the NGOs left.

Government-NGO relations

In general, there has been a relatively good working relationship and well-established mechanism for dialogue between government and NGOs in the education sector because NGOs have played a significant role in meeting the education needs of the population. The long experience of education officials in working with NGOs provided an enabling environment for KIND to implement a social accountability project, at least when compared with other sectors. Nonetheless, while there was good cooperation from some national ministry officials, other actors in the ministry (PDH) and the deconcentrated offices were not keen to cooperate. There is still quite a strong feeling of distrust among these officials towards NGOs and their activities.

Our interviews with district offices and schools indicated that they were not interested in working with KIND on this project. They told us that they only do what they are instructed by the ministry. For instance, the head of DOE explained that he did not want to engage with the project, but did so only because he had been told by the provincial office. Without provincial orders, he would not have attended the public meetings KIND organised. He complained: “I have a lot of work to do. I didn’t want to join NGO meeting, but the ministry told me to.” He did not hold the project or KIND in high regard, and indeed described NGOs: “NGOs only engage in negative criticism and reveal the negative aspects of government policies. I don’t want to work with them” (interview, Kampot, 28 October 2014). Therefore, despite the project’s principle of “constructive engagement” in dealings with the government, there is little evidence from this study or the study reviewed in Chapter 4 to suggest that the social accountability approach has yet contributed to reduce the distrust and hostility of government officials towards NGOs and their projects.

Conclusion

The analysis of social accountability in tracking textbooks suggests that the initiative was able to induce national policy changes, directly addressing the problems identified by the project. A committee for textbook monitoring has also been set up to implement the regulations adopted. The minister, who was already trying to promote reform, could use the evidence to push the reform agenda forward. This created national opportunities and conditions for this initiative to have more impact than the water and solid waste project. Nonetheless, it remains to be seen whether these national policy changes will be implemented effectively, given the little enthusiasm among other national and local actors. Also, there has been no organisation and mobilisation of collective action, nor links established with other local associations to develop strong public support. The project avoided being seen as a political actor promoting and motivating public activism in its approach to influence state actors. This represents a missed opportunity to aggregate voices beyond those of the project participants.

6. Community scorecards and local healthcare

In this chapter, change in local health services is examined using the case of the Community Scorecards for Health Services Project (CSCCHSP). The World Bank-funded CSCCHSP was implemented in 2012 by Buddhism for Health (BfH) in 20 health centres in Takeo’s Kiri Vong operational district.¹ For this case study, one health centre—Chi Khmar—was selected, which covers three communes: Chi Khmar, Smaong and Tralach. The three communes contain 25 villages with a combined population of more than 160,000, the vast majority of whom are rice farmers.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the current situation of primary healthcare and local accountability, followed by a description of the CSCCHSP and its results. The project’s success and limits in improving service responsiveness and addressing the accountability gap is then explained.

Primary healthcare and accountability

The health system was set up in 1996 and, with heavy foreign assistance, has achieved remarkable success in meeting people’s basic needs. Two or three communes are served by a health centre (HC).² HCs perform the mandated minimum package of activities, which include maternity, family planning, outpatient consultation and immunisation. They also act as screening centres for district hospitals, referring patients for specialised treatment.

Table 1: Basic health indicators of the study sites

	2008	2009	2010
Chi Khmar			
% of women delivered by TBA	3%	12%	13%
# of mothers who died after delivery (0 day – 1 month)	0	0	0
# of infants who died after delivery (0 day – 1 month)	1	0	0
% of infants, 9-12 months, who do not receive full immunisation	0%	0%	18%
Tralach			
% of women delivered by TBA	12%	0%	0%
# of mothers who died after delivery (0 day – 1 month)	2	0	0
# of infants who died after delivery (0 day – 1 month)	5	4	5
% of infants, 9-12 months, who do not receive full immunisation	0%	0%	3%
Smaong			
% of women delivered by TBA	6%	4%	0%
# of mothers who died after delivery (0 day – 1 month)	1	0	0
# of infants who died after delivery (0 day – 1 month)	3	2	0
% of infants, 9-12 months, who do not receive full immunisation	3%	2%	0%

TBA: Traditional birth assistant

Source: commune database online, NCDD 2010

1 The OD spans 30 communes in four administrative districts: Kiri Vong, Treang, Bourei Cholsar and Koh Andaet.

2 The government’s future plan is to have one health centre for one commune.

The performance of healthcare at the study sites has been positive, although some indicators show a worsening trend. Official data in Table 1 indicates that the vast majority of expectant mothers used the midwife service; the number of deaths as a result of delivery was low and the proportion of vaccinated children was high. Another indicator of general sufficiency was the villagers' articulation of their needs. A commune councillor suggested that in public forums, people often raised priorities related to irrigation water, roads or electricity, but rarely about health (interview with commune councillor, Kiri Vong district, Takeo, 10 September 2014).

Poor people's access to health services has been facilitated by the donor-funded health equity funds, which reimburse public health institutions for services provided to the poor. With these favourable conditions, the HC is unlikely to encounter too many accountability problems, as long as it keeps up its performance level.

The health sector has institutionalised a participation structure with accountability in mind. The participation structure includes village health support groups (VHSGs) and health centre management committees (HCMCs).³ In addition, there is a complaint box located in every HC (World Bank 2013).⁴ This structure was envisaged to promote HCs' downward accountability (MOH 2008, 9). In practice, however, there are hurdles and some success. The complaint box has rarely been used. Prohibitive factors include illiteracy, lack of awareness and fear of being identified (World Bank 2013, 35). The VHSG has also been underutilised. The World Bank (2013) attributes the problem to the perceived status of VHSGs as merely extensions of HCs. The operational district (OD) chief commented that the existing feedback mechanisms are designed to be direct between users and service providers, which is an uncomfortable arrangement for users. Justified or not, villagers are very conscious of consequences of certain behaviour and adapt accordingly. For example, there is a deeply held belief that criticising health workers can result in mistreatment in future visits to the HC (interview with HC chief, commune authorities, project facilitator, Takeo, 9-10 September 2014, OD chief, Takeo, 13 November 2014 and BfH, Phnom Penh, 14 August 2014). Some are afraid of causing rifts with local authorities. As a result, villagers usually restrict expressing their dissatisfaction with health services to their immediate circle. Only when problems become unbearable are there open reprimands, such as voicing discontent in public meetings with officials (interview with villagers, Takeo, 25 December 2014). Generally, because of these perception issues, the exercise of "voice" has been replaced by silence or "exit" through using private clinics or pharmacies⁵ (World Bank 2013, 35). Silence as a social norm is more typical in health than in other domains. There was a consensus among informants that health workers' attitude is the biggest concern, but informants who experienced improper behaviour during a visit to the HC regard it as a "small problem", so they forget about it rather than complain, say, to the village chief. Furthermore, not everyone has encountered unfriendly attitudes. Hence collective action to deal with the problem cannot realistically be expected. This is in sharp contrast to the experience in land disputes, when people's livelihoods are seriously threatened and social mobilisation is far more likely. Consequently, social accountability mechanisms can open up political space for articulating grievances in dormant areas like health.

3 As specified in the MoH's 2008 community participation policy, VHSGs act as intermediaries between communities and HCs, providing information about HC activities, services and fees, reporting user feedback and supporting HCs' outreach activities. HCMCs are the HC management structure, chaired by a commune vice-chief.

4 The visited HC does not have one.

5 Private clinics are typically run by public health professionals. They provide a wider range of diagnostic services than HCs and are therefore able to attract patients with more serious illnesses.

When they exist, user complaints are discussed in HCMC meetings. This may necessitate HC follow-up with the health workers concerned and commune council interventions, resulting in friendlier attitudes and better service (World Bank 2013, 37; Ui et al. 2010, 104). Unfortunately, as the World Bank (2013) indicates, HCMC assertiveness is not widely evident. One reason is commune councils' hesitation to intervene in domains outside their core mandate, which traditionally places them in the hierarchy of the Ministry of Interior. Making "too much noise" in HCMC meetings is perceived to be "overstepping boundaries". Another reason relates to personal factors—lack of incentive, time, leadership and knowledge—which prevent them from engaging substantially in HC operations and management (World Bank 2013, 37).

Context

Given the limitations of mainstream participation mechanisms, social accountability tools are conceived to bridge the gaps and improve public services. A community scorecard is a hybrid tool that combines features of citizen report cards and social audits. It is a multi-phase activity that involves citizens, local officials and service providers in joint gap identification and problem solving, often with facilitation by NGOs. Engagement of NGOs eases the tension between the government and citizens regarding community needs. According to the OD chief, people generally trust NGOs as intermediaries and are more likely to express opinions in their presence. A CSC is characteristic of short-route accountability, where service users demand expedited responsiveness from service administrators rather than using the traditional route of making complaints to local public officials. BfH's stated goals for the CSC/HSP were several. One aim was to improve health service quality, which the organisation found lacking. Another was to complement the existing participation structure to foster community participation and supply grassroots data for related health projects. CSC provided avenue for expression that was otherwise uncommon. Also, the data collection resembled a public opinion poll for the HC and its supervising OD, which had never undertaken their own survey (interview with OD chief, Takeo, 13 November 2014). More subtle, however, was the project and its parent Demand for Good Governance (DFGG) programme's vision to arrange government experimentation with new modes of working and accountability and enhance rapport between the state and civil society based on constructive engagement (Rodan and Hughes 2012, 135). BfH stresses that CSC is not an opportunity to blame or confront public service providers. Quoted by Rodan and Hughes (2014, 135), a World Bank official summed up the background assumption underlying the DFGG:

We know there are certain things that are off limits ... The government will make sure that line is not crossed ... We are trying to close the gap between what is theoretically possible and what is actually happening. Without pushing the frontier, we can do a lot that isn't being done. Hopefully the frontier will move, but we can do a lot of things up to the frontier that weren't being done.

This approach demonstrates a contextual understanding and implies the criticality of politics in delivering change in public services. Joshi and Houtzager (2012, 152) argue that political processes that support social accountability, not social accountability per se, "lie at the heart" of positive outcomes.

Project structure and approach

Aligning with constructive engagement, participants in the CSC included villagers, village chiefs, commune councils, district and provincial governments, health ministry agencies

and health centre staff. Implementation was in two phases: village meetings in tandem with service provider's self-evaluation, and interface meetings. Meetings were conducted in every village. In the studied HC, the chief of each commune plus the HCMC chief as lead facilitator⁶ were selected to be facilitators and went through a three-day training programme. The village meeting began with awareness raising on HC services to promote usage. Evaluation proceeded when villagers were separated into discussion groups based on the time they last visited the HC. The facilitators led the discussion and a literate villager was asked to take notes. It was essentially a question and answer session in which villagers were asked to express opinions on a standardised set of indicators: staff behaviour, presence, hygiene, medical treatment and patient behaviour. A five-point scale, from very poor to very good, was represented by five different colour cards with smiley faces. The participants voted for the scale best reflecting each indicator. When there were non-user participants, BfH staff took this opportunity to identify reasons for not using the HC.⁷ Aggregate scores for each indicator were put on a flip chart in matrix format. A village meeting was usually held at a villager's house conveniently located in the village centre, with attendance of 20 to 30 people. Most participants were women because they were more likely to be at home. After a series of village meetings, an internal meeting was held among BfH staff and the facilitators to consolidate the indicators and their satisfaction levels and scores to prepare for the interface meeting. In the meantime, the HC conducted its own evaluation similarly to the village meetings.

At the interface meeting, the indicators of both village meetings and HC self-evaluation were discussed by the participating BfH staff, commune chiefs/councillors, HC, OD, deputy district governor (who facilitated the meeting) and VHSG chiefs, who represented the villagers. An action plan was then developed to address the issues. Table 2 outlines the issues and solutions for the Chi Khmar HC. Progress was monitored by BfH staff surveying the HC, commune councillors and villagers.

Table 2: HC issues and solutions

Issues	Solutions
HC staff attitude	Corrective advice in HC meetings
Toilet hygiene	Repair water pump Raise awareness on how to use the pump
Prescribing medicines without diagnosis	Diagnosis must be performed
Irregular working hours and lateness	Corrective advice in HC meetings
Medical waste disposal facility	Request funds from commune councils
Personal hygiene of patients and caretakers	Awareness raising by HC staff and VHSGs
Patients demanding extra medicines	Awareness raising

Outcomes

First and foremost, the CSC was to enhance the quality of healthcare, and on this the project largely succeeded. BfH's monitoring reports show that the action plan developed in the interface meeting was mostly successfully implemented—a pump was installed to supply

⁶ He is also a village chief and *achar*.

⁷ Common reasons included perceived incompetence and carelessness of HC staff, long waiting time, unavailability of injections and syringe drips.

water to the toilets; the medical waste disposal facility issue was partly resolved;⁸ HC staff attitudes, working hours and prescriptions were addressed in internal HC meetings leading to increased friendliness and regularity and changed prescription practice. The overall change was confirmed by other project participants and villagers. The Chi Khmar HC experience shows that CSC allowed many people on a large scale to articulate concerns that were not reflected in numerical health indicators. Both government officials and service providers had positive impressions and exhibited a receptive attitude. The exercise was a first step towards future collective actions, but its long-term impact is hard to foresee. For example, the goal of empowering citizens and altering entrenched power relations remains elusive, as will be examined below. To be fair, that goal has not really been aimed at by the DFGG, at least in the short or medium term.

Responsiveness without accountability

The evidence suggests that the HC was responsive, measured by improved ethics, facilities and professionalism. The important question, however, is whether responsiveness was an outcome of accountability of service providers to villagers.

Bottom-up demand for accountability was weak. As suggested by Ackerman (2005, 18), government and service provider reforms can yield very limited outcomes if citizens and civil society are not able to leverage those to their advantage. The Kiri Vong experience vindicated this concern with challenges dotting the life cycle of the initiative. Beginning with the information and mobilisation stage, the lead facilitator commented that it was difficult to invite villagers to attend village meetings because many were busy or disinterested. A participant villager who could barely recall the experience said that it was true that people who were busy did not go to the meeting; however, those who were at home complied with the invitation, interested or not. In this light, people going to CSC meetings did not do so out of an urge to articulate their opinions on health service but to comply with an authoritative invitation and fulfil a social routine.

Notably, the informants remember the meeting, not because of its purpose or distinction, but because of the place it was held or the snack offered. This had to do with the information they received when being invited. According to their account, the village chief told them the meeting was something related to visits from HC staff. On the contrary, the lead facilitator's account indicated that the announced purpose was to criticise or evaluate the HC. This was a typical communication problem, and the villagers were highly unlikely to know what was expected from them going to the meeting.

There were other challenges when they participated. The standardised list of indicators used to gain opinions left little or no space for locally generated concerns. Nevertheless, standardised indicators can be effective in a meeting that was meant to last a maximum of two hours. According to a commune councillor, villagers are not accustomed to answering open-ended questions in meetings (interview, Takeo, 10 September 2014). They need to be given clues and asked to assess issues statement by statement. In interface meetings, when solutions to the identified gaps were decided, VHSG chiefs were usually chosen as representative of the

⁸ The three councils covered by the HC were supposed to share the expense, but communes that do not host the HC were more reluctant to do so.

villagers.⁹ The problem is that they can be highly partisan and hence not able to articulate the preferences of those they represent.

This particular CSC exercise showed that villagers' awareness was low, participation was passive and capacity was limited. With these constraints, empowerment remains an illusion. Consequently, relations between citizens, local officials and service providers cannot be conceived of as an accountability relationship characterised by answerability and sanction (Schedler 1999). The changes in local health service that occurred in this context gives rise to a situation we describe as responsiveness without accountability. That is, the state was willing to perform its core responsibilities in the absence of a strong societal pressure—a dynamic that will be explored below.

While the health sector has a long history of deconcentration, its decision making remains highly centralised. Any kind of partnership with its local departments often requires endorsement from the ministry. The HC deputy director said that, without the OD's involvement or permission, the HC would not have dared to participate in the project. Prior to project implementation, a national workshop was arranged attended by the secretary of state of MOH and NGOs that were going to implement social accountability projects to cultivate a joint decision for this purpose. The outcome was a CSC guideline cum central directive for subnational administrations and agencies to take part and achieve the set goals (interview with BfH, Phnom Penh, 12 November 2014). Vitaly, the decision meant that the ministry was prepared to listen and act. This initial step basically secured success for social accountability initiatives in achieving better public services.

The support for CSC, nonetheless, did not come without resistance. For example, the term "community scorecard" was originally translated into Khmer as ប័ណ្ណពិន្ទុសហគមន៍, a direct translation of the English term. BfH staff indicated that this translation was not well received by the ministry, which thought it implied an intention to highlight health centres' performance deficits. The final adopted translation was ចូលរួមវិភាគសេវាសុខភាព, which literally means "participatory analysis of health service" (interview with BfH, Phnom Penh, 13 August 2014).

The OD and HC found the CSC to provide a useful opportunity to discern public opinion and service gaps and display willingness to take corrective measures. As can be seen from the project outcomes, they had a rather easy ride to meet the goal: the HC was given a set of tasks that largely fell within the scope of local resources and capacity. They were not the kind of challenges that require ministerial actions or large funding that would have stalled improvement. Related service gaps elicited from citizens (CSC indicators) had also been attended to in the MOH's strategic plan, indicating an alignment between government policy and user perception on shortcomings of the health sector. Nonetheless, the OD chief maintains that the health sector is mono-directional:

Our focus is to ensure that service providers follow provisions in MOH's guideline, for example, attitude; 24-hour operation; responsibility; hygiene etc. This is the leadership's main role. We are not yet in a situation where we spend the energy to find out if people are satisfied with us or not. This has to be done by a third party. (Interview, Takeo, 13 November 2014)

⁹ One of the strengths of CSC is that villagers can criticise without revealing their identity or fear of reprisal. Villagers themselves do not join an interface meeting.

While the statement downplays grassroots feedback, it did not rule out the feedback's relevance in the manner that we observed in Chapters 4 and 5. The OD chief admits that there are gaps that can be improved by community feedback. The statement also reflects that health reform prioritises access, which emphasises infrastructure expansion more than quality enhancement, which focuses on social relations like accountability (Grindle 2005, 18).

Conclusion

Involving broad evaluation of HC services, the project's strategy was to problematise deficits by aggregating the voice of the masses and leveraging top-down instructions. The latter method was instrumental in the HC's response to service gaps made public by collective actors. This analysis examined citizen and state dynamics to explain why change, albeit limited, occurred. The findings suggest that the HC's actions to remedy its shortcomings in response to participatory analysis of health services was not the direct outcome of an empowered citizenry exacting accountability from service administrators. Examination of their participation in this initiative suggested persistent barriers that prevent it from succeeding on the basis of social accountability. Nevertheless, the aggregate voice was fed into the broader political process when boundaries of change had been negotiated that would have limited effects on the prevailing power equilibrium. Negotiated political opening, therefore, was the key to responsiveness, not social accountability. This phenomenon can be described as responsiveness without accountability.

7. Discussion and conclusions

This study examined three examples of social accountability initiatives in services in order to explain how social accountability works in Cambodia and to identify specific dynamics that enabled or constrained these initiatives. In this chapter, we compare the empirical evidence from the three case studies in order to reflect on the extent to which these initiatives changed the pattern of engagement between society and the state in favour of the poor. The chapter then discusses major findings, highlighting the potential sources for and obstacles to citizen power through social accountability. The findings also affirmed the discussions to conduct such a study at this time to feed into the design and implementation of the next stage of government-donor support social accountability initiatives. In addition, we draw some policy implications.

Social accountability in Cambodia has evolved in the context of decentralisation and deconcentration. The arguments of its advocates are its promises for service delivery improvements and citizen empowerment. As we showed in Chapter 2, this argument is based on a very optimistic assumption that greater access to information about public sector performance will motivate citizens' collective actions to pressure state officials and trigger the government to respond. Yet, empirical evidence has questioned or rejected this assumption in case studies around the world.

A growing body of literature recognises that social accountability processes and outcomes are heavily context dependent and constrained by political economy factors—the competing interests of and relationships between the state and civil society. This body of literature also recognises that social accountability is a political process insofar as it aims to empower poor citizens to make claims on state actors. This requires the poor to engage in conflict over power

and resources. The starting point for a political economy approach, the approach adopted in this study, is that pre-existing distributions of power and social and community resource endowments and relationships will have a significant effect on the ability of the poor to engage in social accountability initiatives. In all three cases, we examined four related concepts—empowerment, motivation, capacity and nature of issues targeted—in our analysis of how and why these initiatives worked the way they did and with what outcomes.

Overall, we found that the social accountability initiatives reviewed had not contributed to greater participation of villagers in the governance of public services nor led to improved relations between government and NGOs. In all three case studies, villagers took part in social accountability processes because they were individually invited by NGOs with the endorsement of local authorities, but we found no activities undertaken by these villagers after the NGOs left or the projects ended. In both education and health, the social accountability initiatives did not activate the existing mechanisms for community participation and oversight. We were surprised to find consistent suspicion and reluctance of local authorities and deconcentrated offices to help or cooperate with NGOs implementing social accountability initiatives in their locality. As a result, NGOs faced difficulty implementing the projects as envisioned and had to compromise on aspects not endorsed by authorities. Because of this, project participants tended to be affiliated with CPP-dominated local administration, while villagers who did not get along with them were excluded.

Unlike citizens' empowerment and state-civil society relations, our studies documented improvements in services. In education, the government implemented some measures to improve textbook provision, mainly due to an enabling environment within the ministry with a new reformist leader. In health, the community scorecard has been institutionalised as an existing feedback mechanism for service improvements but we found that only "small problems" were allowed to be included. In the water and solid waste study, we observed the least impact on services due to a lack of willingness on the part of government to be responsive while decisions about service provision were highly centralised.

Finally, our case studies found it highly problematic to expect local authorities, particularly commune councils, to be the primary conduit of accountability between state and society. Commune councils are not able to play significant roles in facilitating dialogue between citizens and state actors, nor are they able to represent the interests and voices of their citizens in the interface with higher officials responsible for public service provision. Local government's lack of power in public service provision is further complicated by the fact that state institutions are quite removed and not at all accountable to local councils. This undermined not only the accountability of state officials to local governments but also the accountability of democratically elected representatives to their voters.

Specific findings

In addition to the general findings discussed above, the observations from the three case studies include:

Information disseminated by social accountability initiatives is not accessible to villagers and lacks specificity for collective action. Information dissemination by social accountability initiatives is primarily for government officials as evidence of the gaps and local needs but is presented in a manner that is not accessible to villagers and does not

propose collective actions. Villagers interviewed for this study did not have access to this information, and only project participants were aware of the social accountability projects. They know little about the information dissemination and activities of the projects. Even the few who had access to the information were not able to interpret these rather general statements as clear evidence of government failure to provide services to the poor (water and solid waste) or rampant corruption (textbooks). This state of affairs has significant implications for ownership of local accountability initiatives. More importantly, there is no specificity about the available actions for villagers to implement resulting from the information. This is further complicated by the fact that most people do not want to engage publicly.

Villagers are very reluctant to participate in social accountability initiatives. Our fieldwork shows that the main constraint on citizen participation is not lack of interest in the issues or collective action, but the fact that the costs of involvement are greater than the perceived benefits, for three reasons. First, villagers are not clear about what they are likely to get from taking part in social accountability initiatives; they are not convinced that the project is likely to change anything for their benefit because there is no concrete course of action available. In all three cases, the action involved mainly information dissemination and interface meetings. None of the initiatives activated the existing accountability mechanisms like school support committee or health centre management committee or motivated villagers to be involved in collective actions. Second, many villagers were acutely aware of fear and resentment from government officials if they acted or said things not endorsed by authority. Given the lack of belief insignificant change from the project, it makes sense for villagers to be cautious. Third, villagers feel they do not have the power by themselves to hold the government accountable, but need powerful backers in their interactions with authorities. In all three cases, they depended on NGOs, local elites or powerful national officials to help them.

Local officials are reluctant to cooperate with the NGOs implementing projects unless there is approval from higher officials. Lack of cooperation by local authorities is a key hurdle for NGOs implementing social accountability initiatives. Lack of cooperation can show in forms from blocking of planned activities to mocking of NGO representatives. It was surprising to observe this attitude despite all three projects having endorsement letters from senior national government officials. We found that local authorities and line ministry officials are not at all comfortable with NGOs interfering in their work and even less so in local affairs, mobilising villagers to make demands. This is not to suggest that they do not want to hear from villagers and be seen as responsive, but that they want villagers to present their demands through existing channels.

Locally focused social accountability initiatives are probably not effective or sustainable. In all three studies, the ultimate authority over resources, funds and coverage was in the hands of national actors rather than local. The initiative in water and solid waste worked only with subnational officials and failed to bring national actors to the table, thus leaving out the relevant actors for service provision. We also observe that, without pressure from above, information dissemination by social accountability initiatives did not result in officials taking responsibility and being held accountable. In education and health, we found fingers pointing from one actor to other actors and other levels. This reflects the complicated nature of much service provision, which means that local initiatives lack sufficient leverage to influence performance in the absence of coordination and support from government reforms.

Social accountability initiatives that have the backing of state reformers have more potential especially if integrated into state structures. Our studies reveal that local voice can influence state responses if it reinforces and empowers state reformers. We observed this dynamic in education, where local demands bolstered existing commitment and capacity of state reformers to push for change. Responses to local voices in the textbook monitoring project were observed because reformers were both willing and able to address the problems. In the other two cases, such backing was not available. This is consistent with accountability reforms in other countries. Jonathan Fox's (2007) convincing analysis of accountability initiatives in Mexico shows that we need a "sandwich strategy" of building coalitions for social accountability reform in both state and civil society because these forces can empower one another.

NGOs in Cambodia are implementing a very weak form of social accountability reform. A significant finding of these studies is that NGOs' emphasis on various tools of social accountability limits the projects' potential to shift the terms of engagement between citizens and authority. We found that information exchange between citizens and authorities tends to be of uncontroversial information that most people already knew. The interface meetings were conducted behind closed doors and attended by very few citizen participants. Unfulfilled promises and misbehaviour are rarely discussed in these meetings, which achieved little in influencing decisions about service provision. Participation of citizens in projects was not inclusive, and no follow-up action was proposed if promises were not acted on. NGOs representatives indicated that they are well aware of the issues but feel they do not have sufficient resources and leverage to stand firm against authority. This has important repercussions with regard to local mobilisation and scaling up of initiatives.

Policy implications

The important point for policy from this study is that enhancing the impacts of social accountability initiatives in Cambodia requires removing some of the constraints discussed above. First, poor and marginalised villagers are constrained from participating and exert voice over the performance of public officials by fear and feelings of disempowerment; therefore, they require support to exercise their voices and make demands. Especially among the poor and women, there is an acute awareness of how officials may react to public criticisms. Unless this fear is reduced, future social accountability initiatives will continue to face great difficulty in mobilising participation of villagers.

Second, social accountability initiatives need, not just the participation of empowered civil society organisations, but also need capable and accountable local governments that can represent and make demands on villagers' behalf. This is very important for two reasons: (1) social accountability is primarily promoted and implemented locally, which suggests substantial devolution of power and resources to local governments; (2) citizens' demands and state capacity to respond are mutually reinforcing—when governments show willingness to accept and respond to citizens' demands, they encourage and create opportunities for more demands.

Third, public service provision is complex, and the failure of public services is influenced by multiple actors and relationships within the broader governance structure. Accountability initiatives that focus exclusively on local level service provision have little chance of influencing or affecting changes at higher levels. Local social accountability initiatives should couple

local pressure and working with national civil society and oversight bodies. This will involve forging alliances with national state and society actors to identify strategies through which local initiatives could leverage a response from national and local decision makers.

In addition, the study makes a number of recommendations to inform and feed into the design, strategy and implementation of the next phase of social accountability initiatives in Cambodia.

- NGOs need to do more ground work before they implement accountability projects to ensure they involve the right people with the appropriate level of authority and at the right level for the project.
- Project funders need to conduct regular monitoring to ensure inclusiveness particularly of villagers who have no connections with local authorities, marginalised groups and opposition supporters.
- Conduct an analysis of the sectors to find out whether government officials accept social accountability principles in the first place. This is important as it affects the result of social accountability initiatives and at the same time impacts on villagers' empowerment and their motivation to participate in the projects.
- There is merit in implementing local accountability projects prior to elections, as the government is more likely to listen and be responsive to local demands.

Conclusion

The way in which these social accountability initiatives were implemented was not social activism driven by citizen pressure; instead they were driven by donor and government agendas. Because of this, the initiatives did not mobilise a critical mass of citizens nor empower reformers to become allies of the initiative. Substantial changes in state-society relations in the near future are quite unlikely, although these initiatives may open up new opportunities for civil society to demand state responsiveness. The improvement in service provision documented in the case study of the education sector was due to electoral accountability informed by the 2013 national election result rather than by social accountability.

While these are the results observed at the end of these projects, the notion of citizen participation and influencing government performance through social activism is new in modern Cambodia. It is also quite early to draw conclusions on the question whether citizen exposure to the concept over time is likely to lead to citizens becoming more confident to hold state officials accountable, and whether public officials' experience working with social accountability reduces their suspicion and distrust of civil society and NGOs. More research is needed to examine these important questions.

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