Real Democratization in Cambodia?
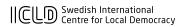# An Empirical Review of the Potential of a Decentralization Reform

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ABSTRACT

The UN-led intervention in Cambodia in 1992/93 could not in itself achieve transition to democracy; at best it could lay the institutional foundations. In the process of democratizing Cambodia has had major impediments to overcome in terms of its political culture, its violent recent history and its institutional limitations. The ongoing decentralization reform - including inter alia local elections, invention by appropriate state institutions and popular participation - is expected to achieve both reconstruction and democratization, but the outcome is far from certain. This article investigates popular perceptions of the evolving decentralization reform and the views of representatives of the commune authorities. The aim is to empirically analyze some of the key dimensions of this reform, namely its role in post-conflict reconstruction, local democratization and local development. In line with other research – our results suggest that the country is moving towards agreement that the decentralization reform has brought improvements in the quality of local governance; there is broad appreciation, greater democratic space, improved commune administration performance and increased accountability. Decentralization reform in Cambodia has so far triggered two distinct macro processes. *Firstly*, it has opened up political space in a benevolent and democratic way. This has facilitated the growth of a (more) positive relationship between civil society and the local state, reduced the governance gap and enhanced the legitimacy of the local state. *Secondly*, it has reconnected the local and the central state apparatus since the local state has acquired a central role in a bold public sector reform that attracts attention and some financial resources.

ACRONYMS

CCs	Commune Councillors
CDP	Commune Development Plan
CDRI	Cambodia Development Resource Institute
COMFREL	Committee for Free and Fair Election in Cambodia
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
CSF	Commune –Sangkat Fund
D'n D Reform	Decentralization and Deconcentration Reform
GNP	Gross National Product
ICLD	International Centre for Local Democracy
IRI	International Republican Institute
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
PSR	Public Sector Reform
TAF	The Asia Foundation
UN	The United Nations
UNTAC	The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia

PREFACE

The mandate of the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is to contribute to poverty alleviation and to strengthen the individual´s freedom and rights by promoting local democracy. In order to fulfil this mandate, we offer capacity-building programmes through our *International Training Programmes*, decentralized cooperation through our *Municipal Exchange Programmes* and, most importantly, knowledge management through our *Centre of Knowledge*. The Centre will document key lessons learned from our ongoing activities, initiate and fund relevant research, engage in scholarly networks, organize conferences and workshops and set up a publication series.

The paper by Joakim Öjendal and Kim Sedara is the seventh paper to be published in a series of Working Papers from the workshop *State of the Art of Local Governance - Challenges for the Next Decade* organized by ICLD in Visby, late April 2010. Several of the leading scholars in the field of local governance/local democracy participated in the workshop. In *Real Democratization in Cambodia? An Empirical Review of the Potential of a Decentralization Reform*, Öjendal & Sedara review and analyze the impact of decentralization in Cambodia since 2002. This article investigates the popular perceptions of the evolving decentralization reform, as well as the views of representatives of the commune authorities. The aim is to empirically analyze the content of this reform on a number of key dimensions, namely its role in post-conflict reconstruction, local democratization and its function as a mechanism for local development. It concludes that for the former two, the process has been highly successful whereas for *local development*, perceptions on improvement are considerably more mixed.

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INTRODUCTION[1]

Cambodia has been subject to major international attention ever since the 'UNTAC' operation - the largest intervention in UN-history at the time - in the early 1990s that aimed to end the war and introduce multiparty democracy (UN 1991; 1995). Although its eventual success has been fiercely debated (Mehmet 1997; Findlay 1995; Doyle 1995) and often regarded as failed (Doyle 1998; St:John 2005), it effectively moved Cambodia into a phase of post-conflict reconstruction with its particular challenges (Junne & Verkoren 2004; Hughes 2003; Peou 2007; Lizee 2000; Öjendal & Lilja 2009). As an integrated part of the Peace Agreement itself (UN 1991), we saw an ambition to rapidly reconstruct Cambodia's political system into one of a 'liberal democracy' in line with the prevailing 'transition paradigm' (Linz & Stepan 1996; cf. Prum 2005),[2] the then hype about the 'third wave of democratization' (Huntington 1991) and the widespread conception that there was no alternative (cf. Fukuyama 1989). However, this modus operandi of the UN-system - intervention, elections, exit - has been seriously questioned (Paris 2004; 2006; Paris & Sisk 2009; Ottaway 2002; 2003; Richmond 2005), and in Cambodia the anticipated 'transition' has been criticized for not producing 'democracy' but instead just being wishful thinking or even a cover up for authoritarianism (Ashley 1998; St: John 2005; Heder 2005; McCargo 2005).

However, much of this debate may have missed the point. With hindsight it seems obvious that a time-limited UN-engagement could not bring about a 'transition' to democracy so it is meaningless to criticize the UN for failing to deliver democracy. At best, the UN could lay the ground for the start of a sustainable process, of which we are now beginning to see the results (cf. Richmond & Franks 2007). In terms of democratization, Cambodia has major obstacles to overcome because of its political culture, violent recent history and structural limitations (lack of institutions, low levels of education and deep poverty). In addition, democratization is likely to take decades to achieve and it needs to be accompanied by strengthening of the state, other democratic reforms and institutional development (ibid.). The political will for reform must come from within and must enable broad-based development and inclusion of localized civil society (Lederach 1997; Paris 2004; Ottaway 2002; Diamond 2002; Öjendal 2005). More than 17 years after the implementation of the peace agreement, features of this kind are still scarce and this calls the credibility of Cambodian 'democratization' into question. For instance, the judicial sector does not meet the standards required of a democratic system (Un 2009), the elections continue to be shallow in relation to the shaping of policy (Hughes 2009) and the 'liberal peace' remains 'virtual' (Richmond & Franks 2007). Increasingly, Cambodia's political system is considered to be 'hybrid' and as such allowing only limited progress towards in-depth democratization (Öjendal & Lilja 2009; cf. Carothers 2002).

However, there are also signs of development in the opposite direction. The 'decentralization reform'[3] does seem to be internally driven - in contrast to the UN-intervention and the insertion of liberal democracy in the 1990s and attempts at judicial reform or anti-corruption legislation in the 2000s. And there are early indications of success (Mansfield & MacLeod 2004; MacAndrew 2004; Öjendal & Kim 2006; Öjendal & Kim 2008; Kim 2010; IRI 2008; TAF 2005; Rusten et al 2004; COMFREL 2007a; 2007b; UN 2002).

2 The idea of 'transition' is institutionalized in the UN-system, eg. as in www.developmentandtransition.net
3 What is here referred to as 'the decentralization reform', began in 2001 and forms part of a larger Public Sector Reform (PSR) called 'the Decentralisation and Deconcentration Reform' ('D'n D Reform'). It constitutes the most advanced, concrete, and thus far successful part of this reform package.

The decentralization reform may therefore represent the most progressive process to date of democratization in Cambodia. If so, then this fits with ideas (and ideals) of democracy being a slow-growing bottom-up process (Schumacher 1973; Chambers 1983; cf. Kim & Ojendal 2009) and it is in keeping with strategies for post-conflict reconstruction that consolidate the new order from the bottom-up (Lederach 1997; Romeo 2002). Here, then, we aim to *empirically analyze the content of this reform* according to a number of key dimensions: the role of the reform in 'post-conflict reconstruction', 'local democratization' and 'local development'. In this way we *aim to evaluate the benefits* of contemporary democratic decentralization in a country like Cambodia. The three dimensions cited here are those that are officially cited as goals of the reform (Sar 2005; Prum 2005).[4]

Below we will first discuss the design and methodological approach of our study and elaborate some theoretical perspectives and then we will review the context and describe the evolution of the decentralization reform. We will then address the key issues that our empirical investigation highlights. Finally, we draw conclusions about the development of the decentralization process and present an analysis of some future challenges for democratic decentralization in Cambodia.

Methodological Approach and Research Design

As is almost always the case, there was no 'baseline' prior to the introduction of this reform. The change in the relations between the (local) state and the people is in fact so great that it is hard to imagine how such a 'baseline' would have looked. However, attempts have been made to define a qualitative 'baseline' by drawing on secondary literature to identify earlier features of local governance (Öjendal & Kim 2006; cf. Blunt & Turner 2005; cf. Luco 2003; Slocomb 2004; cf. Vickery 1986; Chandler 1991).[5] There is broad agreement that the old-style commune rule (prior to 2002, and even more so prior to 1993) was authoritarian, power-oriented, centralized and based on fear and coercion. This way of exercising authority held few qualities of 'democracy' or 'participation' and it limited 'development' because it functioned largely in the context of the lingering civil war with the Khmer Rouge to enable the government to maintain control and acquire a degree of legitimacy (cf. Slocomb 2004; cf. Vickery 1986). Although this 'baseline' provides an important background for analysis of the changes wrought by decentralization, we aim to be more precise in this paper.

This article draws mainly on two large surveys and extensive qualitative fieldwork from several sites. The quantitative surveys were separated in time by almost 4 years and they were conducted either side of important elections (2005 and 2008/9). The surveys were carried out in five selected provinces and comprised 646 general respondents and 73 commune councillors. They were conducted in Khmer by well-trained and experienced staff who were given training, supervision and in-field feedback by one of the authors of this article. We strove to achieve a gender balance among respondents and this resulted in 42 percent women and 58 percent men.[6] The qualitative fieldwork consists of several lengthy stays in villages, totalling altogether more than three months. Our article investigates the perceptions held by the general population and commune authorities of the evolving decentralization reform. The fact that the survey was repeated, using identical questions that were asked by the same interviewers at the same sites makes it unique and of comparatively high reliability. Moreover, since respondents include both commune

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4 "The reform of the government is based on democratic participation via local elections./..../ The main purpose of the reform is to strengthen national stability, national consolidation, and political development" (Sar Kheng, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior, speech during the closing ceremony of the Seila annual workshop 12-13/Sept 2005, Siem Reap).
5 This is not a 'baseline' constructed for measuring impact. It is a sensitive reading of a wide range of secondary literature and a qualitative assessment of the situation for local governance before the reform. It also draws on both authors' extensive accounts of Cambodian local context prior to the reform (eg. Öjendal 2000; Kim 2001). Although well-grounded, exact measurements of this baseline are lacking, we can be confident that we have captured key traits, and we therefore include them in the present analysis. In the diagrams below, they are added as a crude point of reference.
6 For the interviews with the 73 commune councillors there is a male dominance due to the overwhelming majority of men in the councils. The ratio of 16 percent female councillors we interviewed corresponds almost exactly to the national average.

councillors and randomly selected members of the general (rural/semi-rural)[7] population, it addresses the possible tensions between 'rulers' and 'ruled'. This means that we can trace changes in perceptions over time with a high degree of accuracy and can contrast the new power holders' views with those of people who are subject to this 'new mode of governance'.

Key Dimensions of Decentralization - Theoretical Underpinnings

Although decentralization has sometimes been dismissed as yet another 'cul-de-sac' (cf. Schurman 1997), it does seem to be more than this. For instance, Blunt & Turner claim that 'In the last twenty years or so political decentralization has become an integral component of the ruling paradigm/.../of democratic governance reform in developing countries' (n.d.:1). Bahl claims that 'One important lesson of the past two decades, learned especially well in East Asia, is that strong central government[s] cannot sustain themselves without granting appropriate decisionmaking autonomy to their sub-national governments' (2000:94). Turner & Hulme (1997) argue that every state needs to find its particular balance between central and local affairs. Since peace agreements are so central it is 'natural' to expect a degree of decentralization in a particular phase of post-conflict reconstruction. Although it has been part of the democratization/development agenda for a long time (eg. Rondinelli et al 1983; Smith 1985) the rationale for decentralization has become stronger in the post-cold war era (cf. Crook & Manor 1998; Manor 1999; Turner & Hulme 1997; Yusuf et al 2000; Cohen & Peterson 1999; Johnson 2001; Blair 2000; Akizuki 2000). There are many good reasons for this.

Firstly, the devastation, stress, distrust, destruction and confusion caused by protracted violence demand that state structures are 'rebuilt' from the ground and upwards (Lederach 1997; Romeo 2002; Woodward 2002; cf. Ledgerwood 2002; Öjendal & Lilja 2009). Reforms - including local elections, the invention of appropriate state institutions and popular participation - are often included in the package of 'decentralization' and are expected to aid in reconstruction. *Secondly*, in the light of the many shallow democracies that were rapidly implemented in the course of the restructuring of the international system in the 1990s, democratic decentralization has become a crucial way of grounding and legitimizing the fledgling democracies that have been described with (dis-)qualifying prefixes such as 'quasi', 'semi', 'Asian' and 'hybrid'. 'Substantial' - as opposed to 'procedural' - democracy (Bastian & Luckham 2003; Diamond 1999; Robinson & White 1998) requires legitimization that democratic decentralization may be able to provide by 'narrowing' the gap between the ruler and the ruled, between voters and the elected.

Thirdly, in the context of poor and conflict-ridden countries, local development is extremely important, particularly for rural communities since these typically bear the brunt of devastation (Romeo 2002). And although the correlation between decentralization and economic development is far from clear (Braathen & Hellevik 2006; Heller 2001; cf. Rusten & Öjendal 2003), when the local state has collapsed, infrastructure has been shattered, the educational system has broken down and the agricultural sector is under-performing there is a case for dramatic strengthening of local, development-oriented government.

For Cambodia, these generic arguments in favour of decentralization fit well; the rapid implementation of democracy was a bold but in many ways 'impossible' mission (Heder 2005; MaCargo 2005). At best, real democratization has only just started now, and the processes of grounding and legitimization are now important for shifting the country out of its 'post-conflict' identity and for consolidating democracy (cf. Diamond 2002). Moreover, Cambodia is performing not only 'reconstruction' (as the post-conflict literature puts it), but also 'invention' (Öjendal & Lilja 2009); the state structures required for creating political stability and basic development have never existed and when stability and development have been attempted, this has not been done in a democratic fashion that has generated political legitimacy. To create legitimacy, the state must close 'the gap' (cf. Mabbet and Chandler 1995) and reduce 'the fear' (Luco 2003) between 'the ruler and the ruled' - it is a contradiction in terms to pursue liberal democracy

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7 Hence there is an acknowledged lack of representativity for the urban areas.

by means of distance, fear and violence. A more dynamic local state is clearly also necessary for improving rural infrastructure and local development in order to reduce poverty (Beresford 2003; Rusten and Öjendal 2003).

However, the fact that we can find theoretical and normative reasons for why democratic decentralization is needed in democratizing post-conflict countries does not mean that it is suitable or will work in this particular case.[8] The fact that the early phase of reform in Cambodia has been deemed largely successful does not imply that there are no problems or that we even know what is going on. Let us briefly review the evolution of the decentralization reform in Cambodia and pick out the key issues that have been contested.

The Context and Background

A decentralization reform in Cambodia was being considered as early as 1994. It was formulated in policy between 1998 and 2000 and was inscribed in law in 2001. It was then put into effect through its first election in 2002 and backed up by subsequent development funding. The reform focuses on the commune level and on the establishment of popularly elected commune councils. This phase is now well documented (Roome 1999; Öjendal 2005; Ayres 2004; Blunt & Turner 2005; Pellini 2005). To the surprise of many, the introduction of 'soft' decentralization was received positively (Ayers 2000; MacAndrew 2004; Mansfield & MacLeod 2004; Öjendal & Kim 2006; TAF 2005; Kim & Öjendal 2006; IRI 2008; Manor 2008) and was judged as perhaps the most fruitful and sustainable step towards reconstructing a democratic state apparatus in the post-conflict period (Kim & Öjendal 2009). However, a number of key issues have been raised:

- To what extent have fear, coercion, lack of trust and state-civil society interaction been addressed by this reform (MacAndrew 2004; Öjendal 2005; Luco 2003)? We refer to this as the 'reconstruction-dilemma' of decentralization.
- To what extent is the reform producing democratic local governance and to what extent does it simply help the ruling party maintain its grip on power (cf. Pak et al. 2007)? We refer to this as the 'democratization dilemma' of decentralization.
- To what extent do commune councils suffer from limited capacity, resources, mandate and the will to undertake local development work and does this lead to shallowness, low ambition and a failure to improve local conditions (Blunt & Turner 2005)? We call this the 'development dilemma' of decentralization.

We shall empirically investigate perceptions of these issues in turn in order to see what values decentralization brings.

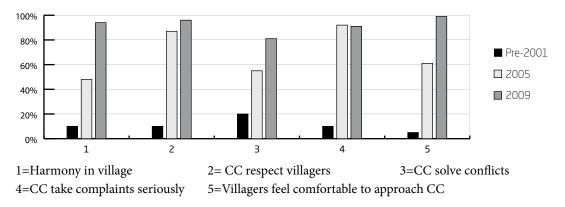## State of the art of Decentralization - Empirical indications

Public perceptions of decentralization

Historically, the Cambodian state has used fear and distance as its main tools of governance (Mabbet and Chandler 1995). Three decades of civil war have not improved the situation (Luco 2003; Slocomb 2001). However, Öjendal & Kim claim that by 2006 democratization, particularly of local governance, had eased this kind of tension. This

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8 Two well-known authorities on decentralization have evaluated this process and arrived at diametrically opposed positions. Turner argues that democratic decentralization is not appropriate in Cambodia because it does not fit with the political culture, which is hierarchical and top-down (Turner and Blunt 2002). Manor on the other hand, argues that the chance of decentralization being successful in Cambodia is high. He bases this on the fact that it has already been relatively successful in only a short period of implementation (Manor 2008). As will be shown, our empirical investigation supports Manor's position.

trend seems to be continuing unabated; almost 94[9] percent of respondents in 2009 claim that the situation in the villages is more harmonious now than it was before the first local elections (2002). This represents twice as many respondents as those holding this view in 2005 (48 percent). Almost 96 percent (up from 87 percent in 2005) now think that the commune councillors respect ordinary citizens, and 81 percent (up from 55 percent in 2005) believe that commune councillors (CCs) generally manage to solve conflicts in the villages. More than 91 percent (92 percent in 2005) claim that general complaints are taken seriously by local authorities and an astonishing 99 percent (up from 61 percent) say that they would turn to the commune authorities if they had a serious problem (See *Graph 1*). It seems clear that the initial phase of democratic decentralization has addressed the '*reconstruction-dilemma*' fruitfully by reducing fear, establishing a mechanism for conflict resolution and reducing the gap between people and local authorities. It also seems as though this success continues, as reflected in high rates of approval in the 2009 survey.[10]

Graph 1

Villagers' perceptions of atmosphere and attitudes in village

1=Harmony in village 2= CC respect villagers 3=CC solve conflicts
4=CC take complaints seriously 5=Villagers feel comfortable to approach CC

The question remains, though, as to whether the reduction of fear and distance leads to proactive involvement and engagement of the rural population. While one may expect fear to abate in a post-conflict reform/situation, it is less sure that participation will occur in a hierarchical political culture like that of Cambodia. In 2009, 91 percent of the villagers knew what the 'Commune Development Plan' (CDP)[11] was, which was up from 57 percent in 2005; 90 percent believe that 'villagers' had been crucial in formulating it (compared to 83 percent 2005). Interestingly, 37 percent claim that they have actually voiced demands directly to the commune council(lors) (up from 26 percent), and in this group 87 percent (68 percent in 2005) believe that their concerns have been taken into consideration by the council. Finally, when villagers are asked whether they would be willing to contribute to the running of commune council projects even if it did not benefit them directly, 96 percent say they would (up from 82 percent in 2005).[12] See *Graph 2*.
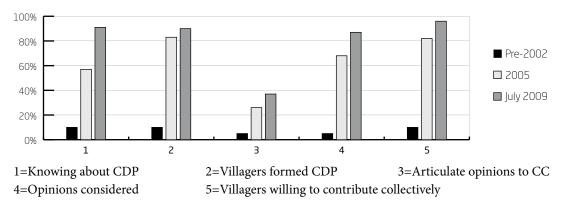
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9 Figures have been rounded.
10 This was remarkable because we had anticipated a slight downturn since initial expectations were unrealistically optimistic.
11 The CDP is a plan drawn up by the commune councils, supposedly with broad participation by the villagers for utilizing the earmarked 'Commune-Sangkat Fund' (CSF) for local development.
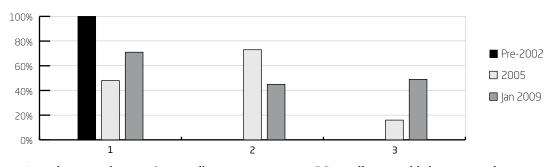12 Some of these questions may invite a 'self-glorifying' or biased response and should not be taken too literally. However, since we are measuring perceptions, these are relative and thus make sense in context.

Graph 2

Villagers' pro-active interaction with CC

1=Knowing about CDP 2=Villagers formed CDP 3=Articulate opinions to CC
4=Opinions considered 5=Villagers willing to contribute collectively

While these indicators show some success with participation, others suggest problems. As much as 71 percent say that they go to meetings because it is 'required' of them, which is up 50 percent from 2005[13] (although 13 percent attend to voice their opinion, which is impressive in this political culture). Also, 45 percent believe that the commune councils are equally accessible for people from any social stratum, which may seem positive in a patronage-based culture, but the figure has dropped from 73 percent in 2005. Even more disturbing is the fact that although 98 percent of people believe that the councillors would try to assist if they were asked (for tasks outside of regular service delivery), half of them believe that this would only happen if 'financial compensation' (*prak upathorm*) was offered. The percentage of those who believe financial compensation is necessary to motivate councillors has tripled since 2005 while the number of those who do not mention economic compensation has shrunk considerably. There is also a notable perception that the wealthy enjoy greater access to the commune councils. See *Graph 3*.

Graph 3

Signs pof backlash at CCs

1=Attend meeting because 'required' 2=CC equally accessible by any social strata
3=Help from CC for financial compensation

Our interpretation - supported by the qualitative fieldwork - of these somewhat contradictory figures is that 'broad' changes, such as reduction of fear, rebuilding of trust, narrowing of distance, enhancing of popular knowledge (about commune councils) and increase in participation do indicate remarkable success. However, there is also a negative trend of people being 'required' to attend meetings, a growth in low-level corruption and strengthening
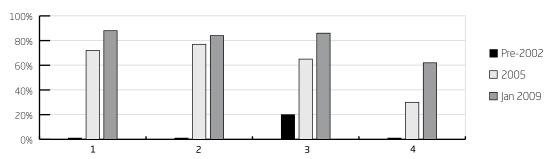
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13 This rather troublingly recalls features of the pre-decentralization era.

of traditional patronage structures.[14] One way of viewing this is that Cambodia is normalizing and now facing 'normal' problems after three decades of violence, oppression and extreme state authoritarianism. While this may sound depressing (cf. Blunt & Turner 2005), it nevertheless represents significant progress when we consider how things were in rural Cambodia in the 1980s and 1990s. Either way, though, the situation today poses a new set of challenges that require urgent attention.

The next issue is the '*democratization dilemma*' of decentralization, which is hotly debated. Overall, it may be said that the dominant party (Cambodian People's Party, CPP) has replaced an authoritarian system with one based on democratic practices including elections, transparency and pluralism, while simultaneously using 'soft' social control to strengthen its own power.[15] The controversy about this concerns whether or not reform can be considered democratic when it has been designed and implemented by a dominant party in such a way as to reinforce this party's power, although largely applying democractic means.

First of all, 88 percent of the villagers believe that the commune councils are democratically elected, which is up from 72 percent in 2005, and 84 percent (up from 77) say they believe that political pluralism has increased the responsiveness of the local authorities. Almost 86 percent believe that the commune councils are honest in the information they disseminate about commune affairs (up from 65 percent), and 62 percent say they think that information reaches villagers in an adequate and correct way (up from 30). See *Graph 4*.

Graph 4
Perceptions of democratic qualities of the CCs
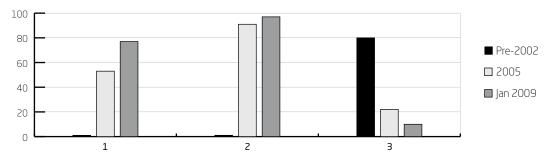

1=CCs are democratically elected   2=Pluralism has increased CC's efficiency
3=CCs are honest   4=Info reaches villagers in a correct way

Although the same party continued to dominate the commune councils after the elections, 77 percent (up from 53 percent) of respondents say that there has been a change in leadership. This means that the representatives (and their attitudes) of the different parties have changed as a result of the elections. Perhaps most importantly, 97 percent believe that if the council does not do a satisfactory job, it can be replaced at the next election (up from 91). 'Only' 10 percent, down from 22 percent in 2005, say that they are afraid to voice their opinion. See *Graph 5*.

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14 The issue of 'corruption' is complex, and it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss it in depth. When we speak of 'corruption' here we are referring to that which is at the margins of legality. Some commune councillors offer 'services' that may be outside of their mandate and for these they request small 'fees'. For instance, they may charge for providing assistance in conflict resolution or for acting as 'witness' to a business deal between two villagers. They may also take fees for services that are supposed to be free (e.g. issuing birth certificates). Fees may also cover charges for services that the councillors are permitted to charge for and are now enforcing while villagers believe that these things 'should be' free of charge and therefore they speak of 'corruption'.

15 The latter is shown by the results of the two commune elections that have been held so far. In the national elections of 2008, the CPP won 90 out of 123 seats in parliament and in the commune elections of 2007, the CPP won 1,591 Commune Chief posts of the 1,621 communes. This has given the CPP almost total political control of the commune level. Repeated election monitoring has found these elections to be largely clean of direct fraud. The 'soft control' mechanism behind this remains unexplained although references to 'patronage' are frequent.

Graph 5
Perceptions of democratic qualities of the CCs

1=Change in leadership due to election   2=CC can be replaced through elections
3=Afraid to voice opinion

The above suggests that there is an emerging local democracy and it is hard to find perceptions that contradict this. Two figures are particularly prominent; although almost all respondents in 2005 believed that the councils could be influenced, in 2009 fewer believed that they can be 'strongly influenced'. When people were asked 'how' the CCs may be influenced, most responded (in 2005 and 2009) that this was not possible by 'voicing one's opinion at meetings' but instead by 'gathering many villagers'. Village meetings seem now to be considered less dynamic political arenas but the local authorities, on the other hand, do seem to be sensitive to public opinion.

The other intriguing finding is that when asked who is the most powerful person in the village, 81 percent said 'the village chief'. Since this is up from only 33 percent in 2005 it shows that the authority of the village chief - who is appointed by the commune council according to the directives of the Ministry of Interior - No 004 dated 1 March 2006 - is considerably greater now. This could be interpreted as a 'de-democratization' of sorts or that the local authorities with a formal mandate (i.e. the commune authorities) have become more democratic although 'power' may have shifted to the village chiefs (see below). A sign of growing public indifference can also be seen in the fact that 51 percent say that they 'do not know' how many parties are represented on the commune council. Once again, the results suggest that 'democratization' and 'legitimization' of the new order have initially been successful but that there is a realization that being able to voice one's opinion does not mean that one will get what one wants (a painful truth in all democracies). Popular engagement may therefore diminish as has happened elsewhere in Cambodia (cf. Kim & Öjendal 2006).
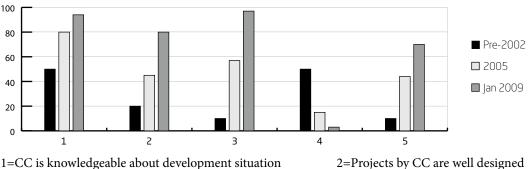
Our last field of inquiry in this section - the '*development dilemma*' of decentralization - elaborates to what extent the councils are publicly seen to be proactively and successfully advocating local development. The majority of people (94 percent, up from 80) believe that the councillors are knowledgeable about the local situation (which is often referred to as a key justification for decentralization). This is not surprising given that the councillors normally come from the villages and live under similar conditions to other villagers. More impressive is the fact that 80 percent of the villagers think that the activities of the councils correspond to local needs (although, when they were asked to qualify this, the majority chose 'fairly well' over 'very well'). It is equally reassuring that 97 percent, up from 57, claim that 'all villagers' are benefiting from the CDP, and when given an option to say who benefits most, the rating of those who are well connected was down from 15 to 3 percent.[16] Another interesting observation is that when they were asked to explain why the village is more harmonious now than it was before the introduction of multiparty elections (asked to those who claimed it was), most (57 percent) said that the councils have managed to build local infrastructure and enhance the standard of living.[17] In our 2005 survey, most claimed that the 'end of war

16 There may be a hidden bias here; the CDP typically deals with small-scale infrastructure constructions (roads, bridges, schools). The reasons for this have to do with history and funding (the CSF). These 'collective goods' typically benefit many, not simply individuals. However, although the meaning of absolute levels can be discussed, the tendency is still valid.
17 The cause is unclear here. Clearly there are other factors that contribute to perceptions of enhanced quality of life, but it is largely credited to the commune councils.

and no more threats from Khmer Rouge' explained why the atmosphere was becoming more harmonious. Hence fear of violence and repression has now been replaced with concern about local development and quality of life. For those who believed that the village was not more harmonious,[18] social issues (gangs and robberies) and economic concerns (livelihood/natural resource management) were the dominant concerns; neither political repression nor fear of violence was their key problem in contrast to earlier perceptions. Furthermore, more than two-thirds believe that 'speed' and 'quality' of the commune council's responses - typically, choice and implementation of development projects - were executed 'satisfactorily' (or 'very satisfactorily', cf. Kim 2011 for a full account).

Graph 6

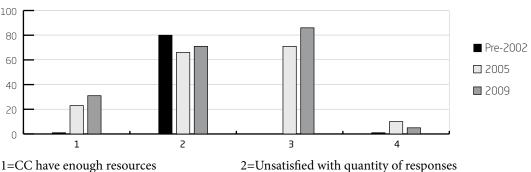**Perceptions of CC development knowledge/capacity**

1=CC is knowledgeable about development situation   2=Projects by CC are well designed
3='All' villagers benefit from CC   4='Being connected' is central
5=Satisfaction with CC speed and quality

There is, however, a degree of 'shallowness' in the councils' governance of the communes. Only 31 percent (up from 23 though) believe that the commune councils have enough resources and capacity to respond fully to the demands of their constituencies, and 71 percent (compared to 66 in 2005) are 'unsatisfied' with the quantity of 'responses'.[19] Almost 86 percent (up from 71) claim that the commune councils do not affect their everyday lives and the percentage of those who claimed to know the content of development projects included in the CDP is down from 10 to 5.

Graph 7

Perceptions of CC development knowledge/capacity

1=CC have enough resources   2=Unsatisfied with quantity of responses
3=CC does not affect everyday life   4=Know the content of CDP

It would appear that villagers consider the commune councils to do what they do well; it is what they fail to do that

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18 This sub-group was small and therefore not representative.
19 This latter is only partially in the hands of the commune councillors since it depends on external funding. Obviously, needs are limitless and cannot be satisfactorily met by the commune councils in the short to medium term.

bothers villagers. This fits with our interpretation above. The commune councils are successful in fulfilling their role in post-conflict reconstruction but this does not solve 'regular' problems. The involvement of the councils in local politics is pro-democratic but political interests also go on outside of the councils and despite their best efforts to maintain control. The public is generally positive about the councils' efforts to engage in development though the lack of financial resources and political weight constrain their influence.

All of the reviewed perceptions above were held by villagers. Let us therefore now turn to the councillors' own assessments of the situation - 'from above'.

Commune councillors' perceptions of decentralization

When the perspective of the authorities - in this case, the commune councillors - on these issues is elicited, different views might be expected. 84 percent of the councillors interviewed in this study were men. Typically, they have 6-7 years of schooling and around half of them were in their 50s. We will review their perceptions of the dilemmas of 'reconstruction', 'democratization', and 'development' in relation to decentralization respectively.

Regarding the '*reconstruction-dilemma*' of decentralization, all councillors (100%) interviewed stressed that the current system clearly differs from previous forms of governance that they have experienced. Many claim that fear and anger have largely been replaced by a degree of respect and trust.

> The bottom-up approach is great. What we work with is the will of the majority, therefore there is a political will to carry out our ideas. The CCs also hold full responsibility for carrying out the job.
>
> Vice Commune Chief, Kampot, July 2009

85 percent of the CC respondents (compared to 38 percent in 2005) said that 'power', which used to be pursued in its raw form, has taken on a new meaning in which the legal qualities of the new system are emphasized. In particular, the way of exercising power (*rot am nach*) is different now (cf. Öjendal & Kim 2006) and a completely new discourse on governance is emerging. The only way of getting things done, one councillor told us, is 'to deliver development [and one should] act gently, never be authoritarian and always avoid appearing corrupt' (Kampot, July 2009). While these may not appear to be earthshattering insights about how to perform good governance, they do represent a new kind of discourse about commune level governance in Cambodia.

This has had an impact on how closely councillors can interact with their subjects. 96 percent of the councillors interviewed reported feeling that they have the necessary knowledge to pursue good policies. Clearly, the CCs believe that the 'governance gap' has diminished:

> During project implementation I often go and see what is going on. Elderly people then tell me that they have never before seen a commune chief who is interested in village development and who comes to observe and engage with villagers. On these occasions, villagers freely speak their mind to me.
>
> Commune Chief, Kampong Speu, July 2009

Moreover, the majority of the councillors (84 percent, up from 76 in 2005) say that they regard themselves as primarily accountable to their citizens. This is complex given that the voters elected the councillors but financial resources come from above. Also, those elected do not sit on the council as autonomous individuals but as party representatives who must carry out the party's 'demands'. One councillor expressed it thus: 'We have to spend the money wisely and villagers must *always* be consulted, but there is also an internal accountability to consider, between us and our [party-]interests' (commune councillor, Kampot, July 2009). Accountability is to be achieved
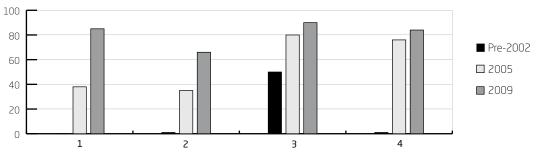
first and foremost by means of transparency (according to 66 percent, up from 35 percent in 2005). The majority (56 percent) of the councillors in our investigation think that this is not simply how they should act in the new order but that it is also the most efficient way to be accountable to the citizens. A commune chief in Siem Reap explained:

> Villagers always ask for many things from the commune. When they ask for ten projects, they get only one, if they are lucky/…../we must be humble and honest with them since we do not have enough financial resources to carry out all the projects that the villagers' request.
>
> Commune Chief, Siem Reap, April/2006

More than 90 percent of the councillors (up from 80 percent in 2005) claim that they spend most of their time working with/for their community.

Graph 8
CCs view reconstruction qualities in decentralization

1=Power as legal mandate
2=Accountability achieved through transparency
3=Time working with Commune affairs
4=Accountability primarily to citizens

In the context of recovery from a civil war in which the communes were the primary actors at local level, with an authoritarian system that is known for its hierarchies, with distance between state and people and ruthless politics, councillors proudly brandish 'pluralism' and 'bottom-up' approaches. Long-serving commune chiefs expressed relief over the fact that they are now encouraged to 'close the gap' to citizens and govern with a soft hand. Beliefs prior to the reform that it would be difficult to convince the commune chiefs to adapt to the new demands seem to have been far from correct.[20]

Regarding the *politics of decentralization*, 93 percent of commune councillors (the same percentage as in 2005) said that their way of exercising power is different from before. The single source of non-accountable authority (*rot am nach*) has been replaced with more collective and consultative leadership. More than two thirds (as compared to 35 percent 2005) say that it is the multiparty nature of this regime that is the key difference from earlier modes of commune governance. Interestingly, 85 percent (same figure as in 2005) of the councillors see no problem with this pluralistic set up.

> The situation is very relaxed now. It is very easy, and it is completely different from any previous system. It is amazing how well councillors with different backgrounds cooperate/…/[Governance through] decentralization is very much about cooperation.
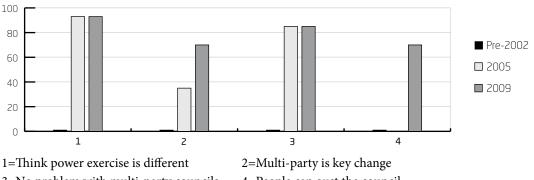>
> Vice Commune Chief, Kampot, July 2009[21]

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20 This is partly because the 'old' commune chiefs seem to have embraced the new system surprisingly quickly. Also, prior to elections, popular locals were put at the top of the party lists and thus they effectively replaced the old, less popular commune chiefs. It is likely that the majority of the 'old' commune chiefs have been replaced by now (Rusten et al. 2004).
21 This was stated in a commune council that had a multiparty, mixed-gender and multiethnic composition.

When asked about the difficulties of national level party politics, a group of commune councillors smiled: 'Don't compare this to national level politics. Forget it! Here we are all working for the community. Why should we fight? There are still objections and disagreement between us though' (Kampot, July 2009). Moreover, both the villagers and the councillors believe that it is primarily the voters (70 percent) that have the power to oust the CC (no data from 2005), while 18 percent believe it is the party.[22]

Graph 9

CCs' views of democratic decentralization

1=Think power exercise is different   2=Multi-party is key change
3=No problem with multi-party councils   4=People can oust the council

While the politics of the CC - vertically vis-à-vis the population as well as horizontally between parties - seem to be taking shape well in the new system, the CCs' concerns are focusing on how to develop/protect the commune. This brings us to the '*development dilemma*' of decentralization.

Almost 96 percent of the councillors believe that their policies are in line with the needs and demands of citizens (up from 85 in 2005). The confidence councillors feel in meeting public demands seems to emanate from the bottom-up approach.

> The flow of development has to go through different steps. It has to begin with our activities being transparent [*Tomlar Pheap*]. Then we earn the trust of the villagers. From this, we get participation and can collect [financial] contributions for projects.
>
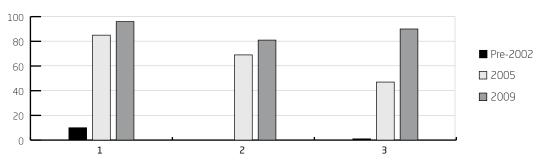> Commune Chief, Kampong Speu, July 2009

In this instance, this was not simply a matter of self-glorification because this particular commune council had managed to raise local contributions to the CDP from the mandatory three percent to ten percent in the last year. However, 81 percent of the CCs thought that lack of funding was the key problem (up from 69) and they lamented their lack of power in generating their own resources. 90 percent (up from 47) felt that local taxation rights would be their favoured remedy.[23] They are guaranteed a minimum level of funding from the central government - now amounting to about 10,000 USD/per commune/per year. This comes through the Commune-Sangkat Fund (CSF). The council cannot yet generate its own local resources and this means that 'the social contract' between state and citizen becomes thin and the lines of accountability become blurred (as noted above). It also means that the resources available for local development are grossly inadequate. The council may gather contributions from NGOs

22 The fact that 18 percent believe that the party that can oust councillors might be thought to signal the way villagers perceive their loyalties. However, these villagers' beliefs are technically correct since councillors can only remain on the council as long as they are on the party list. The commune chief in the preceding quote was replaced after the last election because the CPP changed their mind about who should be their top candidate.
23 Taxation rights are described in the Decentralization Law and were expected to have been established by now. However, the Ministry of Economy and Finance has been blocking this by failing to draft a sub-decree to regulate this and failing to develop instruments for implementation. This is a long-standing issue at the national level. An embittered commune chief complained to us, 'Maybe we will have the authority to collect taxes when we are all dead'.

but although income from these sources seems to be rising, it is uneven and unpredictable.

Graph 10
CCs' views of local development issues
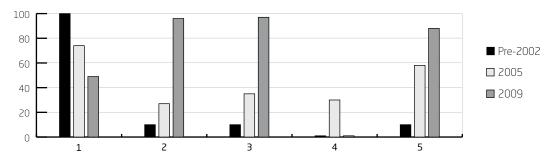

1=Policies in line with popular demand   2=Lack of funding as key problem
3=Local taxation as solution to funding problems

This is also reflected in the councillors' perceptions of their development work. 49 percent consider their work to be 'unsatisfactory' in terms of 'quantity', which seems unusually self-critical since 96 percent felt that the 'speed' and 97 percent, the 'quality' of their development work was satisfactory. In 2005, these figures were far lower at 74, 27 and 35 percent respectively. More troubling is the fact that the number of councillors who regard villagers as 'highly active' in development work is down from 30 percent to 1 percent (although 88 percent rank them as 'rather active').

Graph 11
Quality measures of local development work

1=Unsatisfied with quantity of development projects   2=Satisfied with implementation speed
3=Satisfied with implementation quality   4=CCs think villagers are 'highly active'
5=CCs think villagers are 'rather active'

Although the projects that are implemented seem to be appreciated, the number (and scope) of them are not satisfactory. The remedy that is chosen in most cases of decentralization and that is also desired here is to extend local taxation rights. Villagers are also clearly less active now that the reform has set in than they were in the initial phase.

> There used to be very high demand on us. But now we explain how few resources we have and people learn and demand less./..../the educated understand, but the poor and uneducated keep nagging. It is a real headache.

> Councillor, Kampot, July 2009

At the end of the day, the CCs' work seems to be well designed but they have far too few resources and rights to make a clear impact on development in the local context.

Conclusion - What are the effects of democratic decentralization?

Overall, our results point to a broad agreement that there has been improvement in the quality of local governance with the 'decentralization reform'. To what extent does our result then tally with previous research? As noted at the beginning of this article, our findings fit well with various studies and evaluations of different phases of the implementation of the reform; this includes broad-based appreciation, greater democratic space, improved commune administration performance and increased accountability (MacAndrew 2004; COMFREL 2007a; 2007b; TAF 2005). There are also some critical remarks in these investigations, such as about the lack of depth of participation (MacAndrew 2004:21), limited gender equality (COMFREL 2007:71) and lack of administrative capacity (Mansfield, & MacLeod, 2004). We partly or fully endorse all of these.

Decentralization does seem to have been successful in Cambodia for addressing the legacy of war and violence. It has aided *political reconstruction* with its 'from-below' re-establishment of a benevolent state presence, its consolidation of peace and its easing of endemic fear.[24] This supports Lederach's ideas about the importance of grounding any post-conflict process, but it also adds something. In our case, it is the combination of a bottom-up approach with the reconstruction of the state that is central. We contend that the particular version of decentralization that has taken place in Cambodia has so far achieved two things. *Firstly*, it has opened up political space in a benevolent (i.e. democratic) way and enabled the growth of a positive relation between civil society and the local state and in the process it has reduced the 'governance gap' and enhanced the legitimacy of the local state. *Secondly*, it has re-connected local government with the central state since local government has been awarded a central role in the initiation of a bold public sector reform that has attracted considerable attention and some financial resources. The new political space may mean that citizens start to cultivate loyalty to the state and this would create much-needed regime legitimacy. The connection between local and central government has reduced the possibility of 'warlordism' or 'anarchy' giving rise to civil strife or instability and it lessens the risk of state failure. Unlike the situation in the 1970s, there would no longer seem to be a discontent rural class that can be mobilized for violent rebellion. As such, and in combination with other developments, decentralization has played a key role in the post-conflict reconstruction of Cambodia.

Decentralization seems to have exceeded expectations in terms of establishing *local democracy* and being a 'learning ground' (cf. Manor 1999) for broader democracy. Although the concept of 'local democracy' is far from straightforward,[25] there is little doubt that democratic sentiments and expectations are spreading rapidly, that elections make a difference locally (and are seen to make a difference), and that people as well as the authorities are becoming increasingly accustomed to the rules of the democratic game.[26] Although the fact that Cambodians have so little previous experience of democracy and their low expectations of it may help account for their positive perceptions of what is, after all, only limited democratization, they do nevertheless have positive perceptions. However, there are real problems with implementation. *Firstly*, local taxation is not yet permitted and this limits the possibilitiy of accountability as well as the ties of reciprocity between the local government and the people. The relationship between state and citizen is therefore shallow and state legitimacy is undeveloped; both parties can and do sometimes choose other 'patrons'. *Secondly*, the CSF is small and it is the democratic niche of village life that is

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24 Again, there are other factors than decentralization that affect the situation but these do not reduce the significance of a solid local political reconstruction.

25 In this case, it does not relate meaningfully to the role of the media, the courts or the right of assembly because of local circumstances. Moreover, it has a complicated relation to systemic democracy; local democratic space may be opened without necessarily creating systemic 'democracy'. This relationship could, as this case indicates, even be contradictory (cf. Öjendal & Kim 2011, forthcoming).

26 According to Diamond, this is the core of democratic consolidation (2000).

maintained primarily through the CCs and the resources they command. It is therefore only allowed to occupy a limited part of each individual's everyday life. Governance outside the CCs is increasingly being executed by the village chiefs, whose democratic mandate is comparatively indirect and unmonitored. *Finally*, the ultimate effects of local democratization may be quite the opposite of what democracy advocates would like to see. Although it may locally include stronger opposition, weaker dominant-party control and real chances of a change of government at elections, the massive CPP presence and 'soft' influence at local level have in reality not been weakened by the introduction of democratic practices. In other words, the changing dynamics at the commune level - largely democratic - have in reality strengthened the CPP's hold on power (at least in the short to medium term). This is described more fully elsewhere (Öjendal & Kim 2011).

Given that decentralization is not simply a formula for local development and poverty alleviation, the *development dilemma* of the reform needs to be viewed from various angles. In short, development activities undertaken within the mandate of the CCs are broadly considered to be well designed, to be carried out within acceptable timeframes and to be of reasonable quality. These activities seem to address various commune interests and they are appreciated by the local population. However, the limited scope of this development, which is niched into small-scale infrastructure, and its seeming irrelevance for the everyday lives of large segments of the population reduces its viability as a development mechanism. According to councillors, the CSF should be larger and local taxation should be permitted. At some point, more comprehensive and dynamic development plans will be necessary, sometimes operating at a larger scale than the commune and encouraging some development 'software'. Overall, although 'decentralization' may not have achieved marked poverty alleviation, it has helped put in place the mechanisms for achieving this by opening channels for resources to be meaningfully (in terms of development and democratization) delivered to rural areas.

Cambodia has been successful with its *post-conflict reconstruction* and the decentralization reform has played a large part in this. Our data tell us that Cambodia is beginning to leave earlier post-conflict problems behind as it shifts towards more 'normal' development problems. Local *democratization* is progressive and promising though it remains hybrid at the national level. Anything more than this, though, could hardly be expected yet in a country with one of the lowest levels of education in the world and with a GNP (PPP) of approximate 700 USD/year. Given the basically democratic nature of commune authority, the interesting *development* feature is that it is likely that local development will have democratic effects as well. In other words, what seems to be hindering the deepening of democracy now is not repressive local authorities but the socio-economic factors that local development is designed to improve. Our conclusion therefore is that 'regular' local development efforts will have direct economic *and* political effects. The greatest current risk for the decentralization reform is that it does not receive sufficient resources, is therefore unable to compete with other processes of change and ultimately falls into obscurity and irrelevance.

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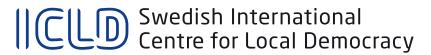
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