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IMPACT OF DECENTRALISATION ON CAMBODIA'S URBAN GOVERNANCE

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ACRONYMS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
CDRI	Cambodia Development Resource Institute
CNDD	National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
CSF	Commune/Sangkat Fund
DGPR	Democratic Governance and Public Sector Reform Programme
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
KII	Key Informant Interview
NGO	Non-government Organisation
RDC	Royal Government of Cambodia
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SRP	Sam Rainsy Party
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UN-Habitat	United Nations Human Resettlements Programme

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Decentralisation has been pursued as a mechanism to strengthen local democracy and enhance service delivery within local government. There are high expectations that its promises can be realised through local citizens' engagement in local decision-making processes that deal specifically with issues of local importance. Instituting local-level participatory processes empowers citizens and communities to voice their opinions on local issues, demand responses from local governments, and hold local authorities accountable for the decisions they make.

Through devolution of power and resources to local government, decentralisation affects the way local politics is conducted in both rural and urban areas. At a theoretical level, there is little discussion on the applicability of decentralisation in the urban context, where socioeconomic characteristics and political and functional roles are distinct from those of their rural counterparts. In spite of that, the role of autonomous local government has been campaigned for and promoted ever since decentralisation began to gain currency in developing countries' reform agendas.

Locally elected government has been instituted in Cambodia since the first council elections in 2002, yet little is known about how local urban authorities, known as sangkats, conduct public affairs. The study seeks to fill this knowledge gap by examining how the reform is affecting local urban governance, especially related to people's participation in local planning, and the sangkat's ability to respond to local demands and its downward accountability. Although it has distinct characteristics, urban government adopts the same policy framework established for the decentralisation reform. Sangkats receive regular budget transfers from central government and implement their annual investment plans and development plans as prescribed by the national legal and policy framework.

With modest resources of a few administrative staff and a meagre budget, sangkats have played an important role in the development of small-scale infrastructure in their localities. This is even more remarkable considering that projects can take several years to complete, as the cost often exceeds the sangkat's annual budget. Public officials make determined efforts to engage local people in planning processes. However, the study noted the common perception held by many urban local councillors that "urban people are too busy to take part in local meetings and planning". Some councillors claimed that their inability to deliver development and reconcile people's expectations is a leading cause of declining citizen participation. Similarly, lack of resources and power has limited their ability to be accountable to their citizens; sometimes they could only pay lip service to their responsibility for mobilising resources to support local development. Basic services such as water supply, electricity, sanitation, and slum upgrading are beyond their control. Therefore, there is very little that sangkats can practically do to improve the delivery of these services apart from *de facto* intervention, though they are keenly aware that people tend to hold them accountable.

This study provides a picture of urban governance in Cambodia through sangkat councillors' perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses in the exercise of their roles as local representatives. These identified weaknesses can inform policy debate and efforts to design mechanisms that strengthen sangkats' ability to serve their citizens. Sangkats' current powers and human and financial resources do not correspond to the scope of work, outputs and services expected of them. Without vested authority and adequate resources, civic participation in local policymaking and thus the legitimacy of sangkats will be weakened. The current challenge is intrinsically linked to and will be addressed by the ongoing discussion on functional assignments to various sub-national governments including the sangkat.

1

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this project is to investigate the impacts of decentralisation on urban governance in Cambodia. Of the major state institutional reforms undertaken during the last decade, decentralisation has been one of the most critical. Theoretically, decentralisation brings the government closer to local citizens and develops people's ownership of local development programmes through democratic participation in local institutions of collective choice, enhanced efficiency and effectiveness of services delivery, public accountability and ultimately poverty reduction (Cheema and Rondinelli 2007; Öjendal and Kim 2008). This reform, which so far has focused on rural communes rather than on urban sangkats, has established the directly elected commune councils that in turn elect the district and provincial councils and members of the Senate. It has brought about significant changes to the sub-national government structure. Moreover, as part of the process of decentralisation, the principle of unified administration is believed to be addressing the fragmentation of line departments' roles and functions at sub-national level. As the reform continues to unfold and research on Cambodia's decentralisation gains momentum, it is timely to pay attention to the evolution of contemporary municipal reform processes, particularly given the rapid growth in urbanisation since the reform's initial design in the late 1990s.

Cambodia's decentralisation reform, formally launched with the first election of local councillors in 2002, is a result of a local programme-based development initiative that encouraged participatory planning and good governance in its implementation (UNCDF 2010). The countrywide reform has contributed to socioeconomic and political empowerment among local citizens. It is said to have opened up political space where people can voice their concerns and preferences for local leaders and development projects (Öjendal and Kim 2008; Ann 2008). Moreover, people have a better understanding of their role in interacting with the state (Heng and So 2012). Communes/sangkats, through their respective discretionary development funds, have contributed to the rehabilitation and construction of local physical infrastructure (mainly roads and irrigation canals), which facilitates services delivery and maximises access to locally available resources, to satisfy the needs and preferences of local people (Plummer 2012; RGC 2010a).

This does not mean that the reform is unfolding without difficulties, however. Rather, it is characterised by slow progress and the deeply divided interests of the political elite, often the cause of coordination and collaboration problems (UNCDF 2010). Some elements within the political elite community want to slow down the reform or derail it altogether. Lack of vision or awareness of the benefits of the reform among officials at national level has impeded the expansion of line ministries' functions. Inter-ministerial coordination has proved particularly difficult (Léautier 2005), which might explain why implementation constantly lags behind the agenda and plans to which government has committed.[1]

Decentralisation has evolved in the face of increasing urbanisation. The growing economic importance of Cambodia's urban areas is clear from the relative decline of agriculture's contribution to the economy from about half of GDP in 1990 to 27 percent in 2008, while industrial output rose from 12 percent to 27 percent alongside service sector growth from 38 percent to 46 percent (UNCDF 2010). At the same time, the urban share of total population

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[1] Interview with HE Leng Vy, deputy director of the National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development (NCDD), 2011.

increased from 17.7 percent in 1998 to 19.5 percent in 2008 (NIS 2009), and is expected to reach 29.2 percent in 2030 (UNDESA 2010).[2] As a result, informal settlements have soared in number; it is estimated that over half of urban dwellers now live in inadequate housing without access to clean water and proper sanitation. Two major development challenges emerge then. First is the dire need to restore or replace the existing dilapidated infrastructure and provide the basic services that will improve the quality of life of people living in poor conditions in urban settings. Second is the imperative to implement development and urbanisation strategies which would empower small and intermediate urban centres to play a vital role as first points of contact in rural-urban interactions. This would also enable them to serve as centres from which goods and services could be channelled to villages for rural development.

The empowerment of local government through promoting participatory planning, integral to the decentralisation process, is seen as a solution to urban challenges (Beng 2006; Biau 2004; Devas 2004). In Cambodia, decentralisation has also been considered a remedy to the quick urbanisation that has put a heavy strain on service delivery in towns and cities (Beng 2006), yet its initial design paid scant attention to the distinct socioeconomic characteristics of the urban landscape.[3] More than a decade later, we still know very little about how the reform is unfolding in the urban context.

Given all the demographic, social and economic changes since the start of the reform, research on decentralisation has centred mostly on commune/sangkat responses to local needs and the reform's role in promoting local democracy and citizenship using mainly fieldwork aimed at collecting data in rural Cambodia. The reform has brought about changes in local attitudes towards local state actors (Öjendal and Kim 2006) as people become more aware of their rights and duties as citizens and the rules that govern the relationship between an individual and the state (Heng *et al.* 2011). However, it is also clear that local government's role in delivering services such as water, education and natural resource management is limited or *de facto* in nature (Kim and Öjendal 2011; Chea 2010). There is a general lack of information to deepen understanding of how decentralisation processes are evolving in the urban environment; this study is one resource to help fill that knowledge gap.

1.1. Research Objectives and Questions

This study is a modest initiative to investigate the impact of deconcentration and decentralisation on urban governance. Governance reform has been a priority, yet little is known about how it has unfolded in the urban setting. Hence our guiding research question – how has decentralisation policy affected urban governance in Cambodia? Specifically, the study seeks to examine sangkats' strategies to encourage local people's involvement in local affairs, and to explore how and in what ways sangkats respond to the demands of their citizens and deliver downward accountability.

1.2. Conceptual Framework

Over the last decade, the Cambodian government has made concerted efforts to consolidate political stability, enforce law and order, institutionalise democracy and human rights and improve economic infrastructure with the aim of promoting sustainable growth and democratic reform (RGC 2009). On the democratic reform front, its main vision is to strengthen democratic

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[2]   It is estimated that 24 percent of the population or 4 million people will be living in urban areas by 2015 (OCM n.d.); applying OECD's definition of "rural" to Cambodia, 48 percent of the population can be classified as living in predominantly urban areas (UNCDF 2010).

[3]   Interview with HE Leng Vy, 2011.

governance through judicial reform, public sector reform and anti-corruption measures. Decentralisation has been given major priority as an important element of public sector reform, which is seen as essential to achieve "broad-based sustainable development and strengthen vibrant local economic foundations so that every citizen has equal opportunity to participate in local development, effective environment and natural resource management and delivery of quality public services to meet the needs of citizen [sic] and poverty reduction by focusing on vulnerable groups, indigenous minorities, women and children" (RGC 2009: 17-18).

When we talk about democratic decentralisation, there are many critical concepts such as participation, accountability, devolution of power, responsiveness, transparency, engagement of civil society, and service delivery (Manor 2011; Kim 2012). To make this democratic decentralisation work well, it is imperative that these terms be expounded. Decentralised local government, through the exercise of democratic rights in elections, participation in local decision-making, and sustained interactions between citizens and local officials (Thon *et al.* 2009; Heng *et al.* 2011), has shrunk the gap between the state and its citizens which is historically deeply embedded in the Cambodian culture (Chandler and Mabbett 1995). To understand this complex and continuous process of connecting authority and citizens, the theoretical literature breaks the debate down into three main concepts: accountability, responsiveness and participation. This study approaches these concepts from an urban spatial dimension, that is, with an understanding that local contexts in cities and towns are always characterised by "the messy reality of competing interests and priorities" (Pieterse 2008) brought about by urbanisation. The following discussion elaborates these concepts and illustrates how they are operationalised.

Participation in local politics and development is a crucial aspect of democratic decentralisation. It allows citizens to engage and to express their views and preferences in relation to community needs and development. When local people have the opportunity to participate in project formulation and budget planning, they are better informed about the activities of councillors and leaders and have a stronger sense of ownership (Heng *et al*. 2011). When participation is enhanced, corruption becomes less feasible as people are able to hold authorities accountable and it is easier to investigate authorities' conduct (Manor 2008). Participation and accountability are closely linked because accountability provides the crucial connection between increased participation (when democratic decentralisation occurs) and good performance by government institutions in any decentralised system (when accountability is strong) (Manor 2008). In Cambodia, people's participation in local planning and development is mandatory, otherwise, the plan and development project lose credibility. This study therefore examines sangkat councillors' perceptions of people's participation in local planning and development projects.

Accountability is one of the most important objectives of development partners' support to the Cambodian government's democratic decentralisation programme (cf. Manor 2008; Öjendal and Kim 2011; Kim 2012). Accountability refers to being answerable for actions (Grindle 2011; Kim 2012). It can be defined as an obligation to answer for actions according to a particular framework (Öjendal and Kim 2007), or as an answering to the use of authority (Moncrieff 2001). Local governance improves when citizens have access to at least three means of holding elected officials accountable for their actions: (i) using their vote to effectively reward or punish the general or specific performance of officials or political parties; (ii) lobbying local governments for a response to their collective needs; and (iii) lodging an appeal or complaint at local-level public agencies where they can be assured of fair and equitable treatment (Grindle 2011). Democratic decentralisation in Cambodia entails three different kinds of accountability: upward, horizontal and downward (Hughes and Devas 2008; Kim 2012; Öjendal and Kim 2007). Upward accountability is when national level officials in line ministries require

their employees at lower levels to be accountable to them; in Cambodian society, upward accountability has been historically strong and remains so today. Horizontal accountability occurs between bureaucrats and elected representatives. Downward accountability takes place when elected officials are accountable to voters. To be accountable, local government has to have clear functions and duties with corresponding powers and resources (for example, materials, finance, staff) to execute those (Horng *et al.* 2007). Local government's ability to meet the expectation of downward accountability is thus measured through clarity of functions, vested powers and access to resources.

Responsiveness refers to authorities' ability to fulfil their promises (rather than inflating constituents' expectations). It is the ability to provide what people demand, for example material outputs and local services. Thus, responsiveness is a matter of being answerable to local interests, which in Cambodia requires knowledge of the local conditions (Kim 2012). Responsiveness can be judged in three ways: (i) the *speed* of responses usually quickens because elected councils at lower levels have enough independent power to react promptly to problems and pleas that arise from ordinary people; (ii) the *quantity* of responses increases because local councils tend to back many small projects as opposed to a few large projects commonly favoured by higher authorities; and (iii) the *quality* of responses improves if we measure quality according to the degree to which responses from government conform to the preferences of ordinary people (Manor 2011). In Cambodia, people judge authorities' responsiveness based on material outputs alone (Kim 2012).

These three concepts underpinning the principles of democratic governance are grounded in decentralised local government and visible in the urban locus. "Urban" is usually associated with the concentration of political power, finance, vital engines of economic growth, and a broad array of services for domestic and international clients. It is commonly equated with such words as "city" and "town" (Pugh 2000). An urban area is often seen as a space with complex and active social interactions (as a function of increasing population density) within a typical economic and political arrangement, which is not necessarily identical to the rest of society. In other words, urban does not simply mean the other end of the spectrum from traditional areas of inquiry in isolated and sparsely populated rural settings (Gutkind 1974).[4] However, this is only partially true in the context of Cambodia where the term urban is defined more for political and planning purposes (Jones 2002) than for social science research. It is against this background that the study investigates the progression of decentralisation in Cambodia's urban setting.

1.3. Methodology

In order to examine how decentralisation is affecting urban governance, the study adopted a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. Qualitative research instruments used for data collection include field observations, in-depth interviews and literature review.

Fieldwork was conducted in the capital city, Phnom Penh, and the main provincial towns in six provinces, namely Siem Reap, Battambang, Kampong Cham, Kampot, Stung Treng and Kampong Thom. Selection of study sangkats took into account the level of urbanisation in

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[4]   As in other countries, Cambodia's definition of urban has changed over time for political and administrative reasons (Jones 2002). The commune/sangkat is currently taken as the administrative boundary for urban-rural differentiation, based on demographic, economic and social aspects. To be classified as urban, a commune/sangkat must meet these criteria: total population > 2000; population density > 200 per km2; and male employment in agriculture < 50 percent (NIS 2004). The study used this definition in the selection of fieldwork locations.

each locality. Using the 2008 Commune Database, Phnom Penh is classified as predominantly urban, Kampot and Kampong Cham as semi-urban, and Siem Reap, Kampong Thom and Steung Treng as predominantly rural (UNCDF 2010). In each provincial town, effort focused on selecting two study sangkats identified as urban according to the government's official policies and definition (NIS 2004).

Interviews were conducted between early 2012 and early 2013. Forty-four key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with national and sub-national government officials including the under-secretary of state in charge of local government reform, an expert on urbanisation, and local sangkat councillors. KIIs with the under-secretary of state and the urbanisation expert focussed on the history of the reform, its progress and the challenges it faces. Those with sangkat councillors covered various subjects ranging from their roles in local development, people's participation, their relations with their municipalities and the challenges they face in implementing their mandated roles and responsibilities as local representatives. In each study sangkat, the sangkat chief, councillors (including those from the opposition party, Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) and clerks, as well as the municipal council chief, councillors and governor, and the chief of the One Window Service (citizen services) Office were invited to take part in the interviews.

The study does not intend to represent the unfolding of decentralisation in urban areas across the country. Rather, it provides a picture of the varying effects of the reform in different urban areas with different population densities. Findings from the study sangkats cannot be used to estimate the effects or draw inferences about the issues shaping democratic decentralisation reform in other urban areas.

2

DECENTRALISATION IN URBAN GOVERNANCE

This section examines the literature on decentralised governance and its utility in the urban setting. Despite the great number of debates about decentralised governance and its contribution to local democracy and development, little attention has been given to its applicability in urban settings.

2.1. Theorising Governance and Decentralisation

The United Nations Development Programme, in the 1990s, guided the reconceptualisation of governance, defining it as "the exercise of political, economic, and administrative authority in the management of a country's affairs" (UNDP 1997a; Cheema and Rondinelli 2007: 6). Put differently, the UNDP viewed governance as "those institutions and processes through which government, civil society organisations and the private sector interact with each other in shaping public affairs and through which citizens articulate their interests, mediate their differences, and exercise their political, economic, and social rights" (UNDP 1997b; Cheema and Rondinelli 2007: 6).

The case for democratic governance is argued on the basis of its enabling institutions to facilitate civic participation in economic and political processes and its ability to promote the universal values of human rights. It guarantees an appropriate mechanism for delegating power and resources to local authorities. As the concept of governance expanded, so did debates about decentralisation. Decentralisation now encompasses not only the transfer of power, authority and responsibility within government but also the sharing of authority and resources for shaping public policy within society (Cheema and Rondinelli 2007).

UN-Habitat, which is mandated to promote socially and environmentally sustainable towns and cities, shares this perception of urban governance. In 1999, UN-Habitat began its Global Campaign on Urban Governance with the theme "Inclusive City", in line with the emerging concept of sustainable development, which had been the key topic of the 1990 Rio Earth Summit. Adopting the definitions of good governance proposed by the World Bank and the UNDP's, UN-Habitat's campaign considers central government one of the principle actors in promoting improved urban governance. Theoretically, devolving authority and resources to local government and involving civil society and private sector actors in decision-making processes is considered an ideal approach towards balancing a city's competitiveness on the one hand and the social costs of economic growth on the other (UNCHS 2000).

Such a concept of governance has its long history in Europe. Devolution of power to local authorities is associated with the concept of local governance, which emanated from a long history of advocating for effective forms of local political leadership. In 19th century Britain, John Stuart Mill advocated the strengthening of local government by highlighting the value of participation and sovereign local knowledge (Öjendal and Dellnas 2010; Diamond 1999). Awareness of local governance came later. Derived mainly from the concept of governance, local governance refers to the complex and multidimensional interactions between and among a broad array of formal institutional arrangements and public participation in decision-making.

Deepening local political participation, as part of the global shift towards the promotion of good governance in the 1980s, became the prescribed route for development and state reform. The concept of local governance evolved to become a defining component of good governance agenda. Policy frameworks for democratic features like participation, civic engagement and

public consultation were institutionalised in development strategies and public sector reforms. By this time, in an effort to strengthen state legitimacy, local communities had been reconnected to the central level as never before. The ruled, who had been alienated by globalisation forces in the guise of democratisation, were now reconnected to the rulers (Öjendal and Dellnas 2010). Furthermore, debate in the literature makes a case for the size of democracy, contending that smaller states tend to be more democratic—electoral or liberal—than bigger ones are. In this regard, a democratisation trend encourages, wherever culture and tradition allow, a country to adopt different modes of governing by devolving power to local government (Diamond 1999). As a result, decentralisation has taken various forms and the options are many, making it a popular policy choice among numerous developing countries.

In the quest for better governance and with conviction in the promise decentralisation holds, developing countries have embarked on reforming their governance structure to fit their political culture and history. Political and administrative decentralisation, as a newly established governance arrangement, has been widely adopted throughout Africa since 2000 in the face of unprecedented rapid urbanisation exacerbated by the intensification of poverty among urban populations (UN-Habitat 2004). Other parts of the developing world such as Asia and, to a lesser extent, Latin America have also implemented decentralisation reform (Stren 2002; Cheema and Rondinelli 2007).

Various modes of decentralisation have been discussed and adopted. Decentralisation is usually linked to the concept of deconcentration, where responsibility from central government and its agencies is transferred to regional or field units that have some discretion in decision-making. The latter remain subordinate to the central authority, however. "Delegation" represents the shifting of responsibility for public functions and decision-making from central to local authorities. The ideal form of decentralisation or devolution usually preferred by its advocates entails the transfer of decision-making authority to local governments, which have the power and resources to perform relatively independently from central government (Dickovick 2005; Heng *et al*. 2011; Chheat *et al*. 2011; ADB 2008).

Without the clear transfer of decision-making power (often referred to as the political dimension), the wherewithal to raise revenue (i.e., its fiscal dimension) and the freedom to use it (administrative decentralisation), reform policies cannot be considered genuine decentralisation (Dickovick 2005). In a devolved system, local governments can deliver services and accountability to their citizens (Agrawal and Ribot 1999). Accountability, mainly downward, is key to promoting local people's participation in local affairs and to making local governments answerable for the responsibilities bestowed upon them and to those who elected them. This downward accountability, in turn, stimulates broader popular participation in political processes and greater responsiveness by the state and its agencies.

2.2. What to Expect of Decentralisation in an Urban Setting

> Decentralisation to municipalities and towns is especially important for two reasons. First, the urban population of the world has expanded from 30 percent in 1950 to 47 percent to 2000 and is projected to increase to 60 percent by 2030. Second, cities and towns are the principal drivers of social and economic development and technological transformation. Cities mean an increase in productivity and improved quality of goods and services; they are also centres of ideas, innovation and learning. Decentralisation allows the emergence of an "inclusive city," or one that facilitates full utilisation of energies and resources of all groups in the community, including civil society organisations. (Cheema 2007: 171-72)

With increasing urbanisation in the 1990s, moral support for decentralised decision-making gained significant momentum. Championed by UN-Habitat, democratic values such as human rights, transparency, civic participation, representation and accountability in a decentralised state system were integrated into various adaptation policy frameworks. Cognisant of the fact that competing objectives hinder reform implementation, UN-Habitat's Global Campaign on Urban Governance to promote its vision of the "inclusive city" advocated for urban institutions to take charge of balancing and reconciling conflicting interests. Inclusive local governance arrangements require that the poor and abandoned be included in democratic decision-making processes. Decentralised government then, is a policy choice towards enhancing equity and inclusiveness (Pieterse 2008; UNCHS 2000).

Importantly, decentralised arrangements, along with globalisation and democratisation processes, affect the governance of cities (Devas 2004). In Asia, the challenges of rapid urbanisation have increased pressure on states to reform their local governments, usually modelled after their colonial heritage, so that they better suit and respond to changing local realities. Many countries subsequently adopted decentralisation to varying degrees. In most, if not all of these cases, however, central government still holds on to power to regulate the reform or to retain control over financial and human resource allocation and services delivery. Furthermore, citizen engagement in consultations and decision-making related to local government affairs has often been enhanced (ADB 2008).

The roles of local authorities in urban governance are crucial to creating an enabling environment for local participation and inclusion of the urban poor and those likely to be particularly disadvantaged, including religious and ethnic groups, persons with disabilities, young people and children, women and conflict-affected groups (Devas 2004). City governments, through open policymaking, can establish appropriate systems and infrastructure that secure access to essential infrastructure and services. By taking part in decision-making and participating in local affairs, citizens help to ensure that their needs are met and their issues addressed. Empowered city governments in a decentralising state system can change the balance of power and the positions of the urban poor and marginalised communities (Devas 2004; Devas and Rakodi 1993; ADB 2008) or even of the entire local constituency. Moreover, citizens' participation in local policymaking plays a vital role in strengthening democracy through the development of civic skills (collaborative decision-making, conflict mediation), sense of belonging, effective decision-making and the legitimacy of those decisions. In other words, instead of just exchanging information, city authorities and citizens are more likely to reach a shared understanding of issues and solutions (Michels and Graaf 2010).

Though there are high expectations of decentralisation reform to provide greater opportunities for meaningful political participation and downward accountability (Hiskey and Seligson 2003), there is little empirical evidence as to how and to what extent people utilise that space to influence policy. In urban contexts, approaches vary from place to place: some countries in Latin America (Stren 2002; Grindle 2007, 2009) and Africa (Canel 2001) allow citizens to have a say in budget allocation, whereas in countries like Cambodia, local citizens are permitted to voice their preferences during the preparation of the annual development plan. As to its functionality in meeting high economic performance in urban contexts, there is only scant support crediting the positive role of decentralisation in sustainable city development (Öjendal and Dellnas 2010). Indeed, the appropriateness of devolving decision-making authority to local urban governments appears questionable since participatory decision-making is believed to be

suitable for rural communities and hinterlands rather than for urban spaces where development projects are more technical and long term and function-based.[5]

However, advocates of decentralised urban governance argued that "decentralisation contributed to establish a more democratic mode of municipal governance by facilitating local participation in municipal affairs and by creating spaces for the practice of democratic citizenship at the community level" (Canel 2001: 25). For instance, decentralisation experience in Montevideo City, Uruguay, in the 1990s exemplifies institutional reform (though sponsored by the state) that created an enabling environment for participatory local-level decision-making, specifically on budget allocation. These three factors shaped the reform's success: "(i) political commitment to institutionalise an open space; (ii) willingness to encourage participatory processes within the structure giving community a say in the allocation of urban resources and investing in capacity-building resources; (iii) a demonstrated commitment to redistribute resources across the city" (Canel 2001: 42).

Despite the compelling advances derived from decentralisation, the reform has shown mixed results, both in terms of advancing local democracy and service delivery (Canel 2001). That said, it has been observed that many of the apparent shortcomings of decentralisation are "due less to inherent weaknesses in the concept itself than to government's ineffectiveness in implementation....Experience in developing countries suggests that successful decentralisation always requires the right ingredients, timing and some degree of experimentation" (Cheema and Rondinelli 2007: 9). Strong endorsement by the political leadership and bureaucratic apparatus are vital to the reform success (Cheema and Rondinelli 2007).

There are ongoing debates as to whether socioeconomic and political contexts simply favour democratic decentralisation reform or actively contribute to its success. It is claimed that the reform can be embarked on in different political and socioeconomic conditions even though levels of success may vary (Manor 2011). With a few exceptions such as in places that face extremes of inequality, inequity, elite behaviour and state incapacity, decentralisation can work reasonably well if three essentials are in place: (1) devolution of substantial powers to elected bodies at lower levels; (2) delegation of substantial resources to devolved local authorities; and (3) development of mechanisms to ensure horizontal accountability between bureaucrats and elected representatives and the downward accountability of elected representatives to ordinary people (Manor 2011).

When these essential conditions for effective decentralisation are in place, responsiveness tends to be enhanced in terms of the speed, quantity (especially small projects) and quality of responses as measured by the degree of the outputs' conformity to local preferences (Manor 2011). When power and resources are devolved to local arenas, civil society and popular participation tends to be stimulated (Manor 2011). Conversely, inability of local government to improve responsiveness is likely to increase dissatisfaction and discourage interest in local decision-making processes (UNDP 2012). The promises decentralisation reforms hold seem to be realisable across geographic and socioeconomic borders.

There are other claims that lend support to contextual conditions determining the performance of the reform. One such contention is that local cultures and socioeconomic conditions are also crucial in the success of local communities to insert themselves into and benefit from the reform. Availability of local leadership, knowledge of mobilisation and social capacity is critical in this regard. Moreover, institutional design is no less important in facilitating participation in decision-making. Clarification of roles and attributions of different actors within

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[5]   Joakim Öjendal, personal communication, July 2012

the system, along with the availability and accessibility of resources, determine the success of operationalisation of citizens' engagement. It should also be noted that high participation at the dawn of the reform and decreasing public sympathy as the reform progresses can be explained by the fact that citizens begin with high expectations. When these fail to materialise, their sense of enthusiasm subsides (Canel 2001).

Another claim is that low civic engagement in urban areas is intrinsic to prevailing socioeconomic structure. That is to say, change in economic structure is part of the answer—especially in urbanising areas where people need to make ends meet and thus cannot allocate much time to community interests (Canel 2001). This argument however does not really explain to what extent urban economic structure has failed civic participation in decentralised decision-making.

In addition to local civic culture and economic structure influencing decentralised governance, political institutions such as elections and access to information also shape the reform's performance. A recent study of 30 decentralised municipalities in Mexico failed to address this question fully, but it did find that local urban government performance is greatly influenced by attentive leadership, competitive elections, and active and informed citizens (Grindle 2007). With increasing resources and decision-making power transferred to municipal governments, citizens were gradually beginning to understand what their local government could do in response to local problems. The long history of authoritarianism, however, has inhibited people's awareness of how to hold local leaders accountable for their exercise of power. Even so, good performance in some municipalities, where information is available on the workings of the government, public finance and resource allocation, will inevitably strengthen public debate about issues of local importance and exemplify vibrant local democracy brought about by decentralisation.

3

RESEARCH FINDINGS

To shed more light on how decentralisation affects urban governance, this study analyses current practices and presents a picture of how decentralised urban governance has unfolded in Cambodia. Decentralision ought to result in stronger local government that is responsive to and acts in the best interests of local communities through formal participatory processes with respect to its potential contribution to local development projects and programmes. Hence our research question – what has local government in Cambodia done to meet that expectation since the beginning of decentralisation reform in the early 2000s?

This section presents the findings of our qualitative investigation and analysis based on field observations and a series of in-depth interviews with sangkat councillors and clerks as well as state representatives. It starts with an overview of urban sangkat characteristics including a description of the study sangkats, followed by discussion of their performance in encouraging participation and delivering accountability and responsiveness.

3.1 Urban Sangkat Characteristics

As defined in the legal framework, the sangkat is the lowest administrative unit in an urban area. The 2001 Law on Commune/Sangkat Administration requires that a council elected by general election lead the sangkat administration. The number of councillors that make up a council varies from one sangkat to another; on average, councils have seven members (NCDD 2010a). As defined in the 2009 Organic Law, the sangkat's immediate upper authority is the municipality, which is run by a council elected by sangkat councillors. Prior to the promulgation of the Organic Law, the lowest administration across the country, except for in Phnom Penh, was the commune or *khum* in Khmer. This legacy remains in the common parlance of local councillors. During our fieldwork, when asked if the name change carries with it different roles and responsibilities, local councillors usually replied, "Everything is the same. The work is still the same; it is only the name that has changed"[6]

Fieldwork in the study towns brought to light the shortage or lack of both material and human resources in the sangkats. Some councils use a rented house or flat or a pagoda building as a base while others occupy a small thatched-roof structure or a small (box-like) room. Only a minority of the councils in the sangkats we visited have the use of a proper building that is appropriate to carry out their mandated functions. With the exception of a few councils that can afford to hire clerical assistants, sangkat offices are mostly staffed by elected councillors and a clerk. During our visits, there was often only a few staff working at the office.

The demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of urban settings are unique. In the fieldwork sites, the average population of a sangkat is 17,233, within a range of 2677 to 64,257. Urban people tend to be more educated than their rural counterparts. The majority work in the service sector, especially the civil service, or are self-employed business owners and traders; on average, 18.21 percent work in the agriculture sector, within a range of zero to 53.22 percent (NCDD 2010a).

In urban areas, everything can be visible and information can be quickly shared and known;[7] one clerk said,

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[6]   Sangkat council, Steung Treng, September 2012
[7]   Joakim Öjendal, personal communication, July 2012

> In the urban area, [it] is pretty easy to obtain and disseminate information. [It is] easy to contact the line agencies because they are all based here. People are fairly well educated—they know the government laws and regulations [and it is] easy for the sangkat councillors to explain [things to them].[8]

In this regard, some local councillors pointed out that

> As we are closer to people, we must be at the office full time during working hours; people need services from us. But in rural areas, councillors are rarely at their office.[9]

This might not be true for every urban sangkat, however, as not all councillors are present at the sangkat office every day.

As economic engines of provinces and the country, urban governments face various social and economic challenges. Crime, violence, slums and poverty, to mention a few, are issues of immediate concern for urban governments. This was confirmed by sangkat councillors who explained how urban areas are constrained by limited basic services such as water, sanitation, health, education and security, for instance,

> ... [this sangkat] is always flooded during the rainy season, and now we have asked the line agencies to help solve this problem.[10]

Demographic, socioeconomic and environmental factors in urban areas seem to nurture both positive and negative elements for local governance. Generally, urban residents are vendors, civil servants or waged/salaried workers, migrant workers from rural areas, informal settlers and farmers. Such composition poses a huge challenge to local urban governments in mobilising participation in local decision-making and dialogues compared with their counterparts in rural settings. Urban constituents can expect local councillors to perform in a way that is acceptable and beneficial to rich or well-connected urbanites, though this social group can tend to bypass the local authority whenever they need services due to their closeness or connections to the state's upper echelons, who continue to retain responsibility for service delivery.[11] While such proximity could encourage better cooperation between different levels of sub-national government, it also creates confusion as the roles and functions of each level are yet to be clarified.

Like their rural counterparts, sangkats in urban areas are mainly preoccupied with administrative work and civil registration. Their role as an agent of central ministries encompasses the collection and processing of socioeconomic data, civil registration tasks for births, deaths and marriages, and other cadastral services.

3.2. People's Participation

In this section, we present our analysis of sangkat councillors' perceptions of citizens' participation in formal meetings and planning exercises as stipulated in the legal framework. Planning exercises include village meetings and formal consultations during the preparation of the annual sangkat development plan. We also take into account the financial contributions,

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8   Sangkat clerk, Battambang, February 2012
9   Sangkat councillor, Siem Reap, March 2013
10 Sangkat clerk and councillor, Battambang, February 2012
11 Sangkat chief, Kampot, August 2012

whatever the amount, that local people are requested to donate towards development projects in their areas as this is also considered participation.

People's participation in local decision-making is seen as a mechanism to strengthen the legitimacy of those decisions and ensure wide support for their execution. Local decision-making mainly involves the preparation of the annual investment plan and the five-year development plan. For both planning exercises, citizens are required to participate in (i) obligatory village meetings that require the attendance of at least 60 percent of all households (with 30 percent women), and (ii) obligatory public meetings where the draft framework and budget are presented. The plans are explained to citizens and further clarifications offered (NCDD 2009 cited in Plummer 2012: 29; NCDD 2010b). However, such public participatory processes are at odds with Cambodian political culture and have so far failed to attract a high rate of participation from households. In addition, wherever people do participate, they rarely voice their concerns.

Urban sangkats face the challenge of encouraging civic participation in local planning: in the words of one councillor,

> ...people's participation sometimes presents a challenge. Because they are all working for the government or running a business, we have to set the meeting times to suit their availability otherwise it would be hard to attract good participation.[12]

Another added,

> ... people's participation is limited in this area because, as you know, they are mostly public servants and business people. The best way [to encourage participation] is to set the time of the meeting according to their availability.[13]

There is a consensus among local councillors that the challenge is mainly intrinsic to the local socioeconomic conditions of urban areas. Substance of participation is also lacking, if participation is defined by its influencing power in decision-making. When asked about people's participation in annual planning, one councillor said,

> People do not really participate. They only react when we raise issues or drop hints – they just repeat what we say. They are also busy with their businesses at the market, which is why they sometimes their send children to take part in meetings. We can only get 30 out of 300 households to take part in meetings.[14]

Encouraging people to participate in local affairs, even in decisions that affect them directly, seemed to require a level of innovation, creativity and ingenuity. For instance, local councillors facilitate attendance at public meetings by holding them at a time that is convenient for local people. As one councillor explained,

> When we invite people to a meeting, we do not arrange it in the morning but usually organise it in the afternoon.[15]

It was also suggested that formalising participation might help encourage greater participation, "... in urban areas...if there is letter of invitation, they would come".[16]

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[12] Sangkat chief, Battambang, Feb 2012
[13] Sangkat councillor, Battambang, Feb 2012
[14] Sangkat councillor, Siem Reap, March 2013
[15] Sangkat chief, Steung Treng, September 2012
[16] Sangkat councillor, Battambang February 2012; municipality councillor, Steung Treng, September 2012

Another innovative way of engaging local people's interest entails using a paper-based form to gather information on local issues and concerns in order to identify local priorities. Of course, other approaches may have been tried but their success remains a mystery due to lack of documentation.

Besides attending meetings, people are expected to make financial contributions to local development projects as stipulated in the government's policy framework (NCSC 2003). Most of the sangkats we visited reported positive responses from their constituents in this regard, though experiences varied from one location to another. For example, we were told by a councillor in one area that

> Contributions can be [readily] collected. Sometimes we do not even need to collect them ourselves. They [locals] will collect contributions on our behalf, even more than was planned. But it is voluntary and those suffering hardship do not contribute.[17]

However, a councillor in another province related a completely different experience,

> Collecting contributions in town is very difficult; we can collect very little from town.[18]

The unevenness in local citizens' contributions could reflect different perceptions of the reform and state intervention in local development.

It is clear that implementing the policy requirement of participatory decision-making as prescribed by the reform[19] is not an easy task in urban areas. The difficulty was well elaborated and summarised by a sangkat chief,

> I used to think that it would be easy to work with urbanites because they are educated and business-minded people, but I was wrong. It is the hardest group to work with, as they are very busy with their businesses, unlike rural people who have only one or two occupations at the most. Urban people find it hard to find free time to take part in meetings because they cannot leave their businesses. We cannot mobilise 60 percent of people to attend a meeting as required by law. But I must say it is better now than before the reform. We feel closer and when we organise a forum I even ask them not to be afraid, as we are their servants.[20]

Low levels of participation in urban areas may not be attributable to urban characteristics as it is also a reality in rural Cambodia. In the study areas, it was commonly observed that participation was quite high at the beginning of the reform.[21] However, our findings suggest that as the reform matured and the capacity of the local government remained too weak to respond to local demands, popular enthusiasm to engage in local planning subsided.[22]

The reform has opened unprecedented space for people to take part in discussion and influence decisions on issues of local importance. People gather at annual meetings to discuss local priorities so that sangkat councils can make final decisions about local development plans and

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17 Sangkat chief, Steung Treng, September 2012
18 Sangkat councillor, September 2012
19 RGC 2005
20 Sangkat chief, Siem Reap, March 2013
21 Sangkat chief, Kampot, January 2012 and municipality governor, Kampot, August 2012
22 Sangkat councillor, Kampot, January 2012; sangkat chief, Siem Reap, March 2013

allocate funds to implement them. Declining levels of participation in that traditional process raises the question whether alternative or more innovative mechanisms are now required in order to promote a greater degree of active civic engagement in local decision-making. It is becoming clear that a measure that enables the empowerment and mobilisation of citizens and communities for bringing specific issues of concern to the attention of local governments is a policy option worth considering.

3.3. Downward Accountability in Limbo

Since the sangkat's establishment in 2002, it has played a pivotal role in improving local infrastructure, empowering citizen engagement in local politics and closing the gap between local governments and their citizens.

Downward accountability is an essential element of decentralisation reform. It is critical that decentralisation reform incorporates an appropriate accountability mechanism, though often politically manipulated, to ensure that empowered local governments exercise their authority and resources properly (Manor 2011). Downward accountability refers to local governments' responsibility for their part in local development planning and implementation and the developmental welfare of their constituencies; it is broadly defined as local governments' ability to respond to local needs and demands (Öjendal and Kim 2006). Such accountability is evaluated through local governments' ability to perform their mandated functions, produce specific outputs, and pool the necessary resources to carry out their responsibilities (Horng *et al.* 2007).

As constituted in the 2001 Law, the commune/sangkat administration is entitled to a fund in order to perform its roles both as a representative of the local people and an administrative arm of the state (see Box 1). Article 73 states that the administration shall have its own financial resources, budget and assets. Article 74 adds that its own revenue shall be generated from fiscal taxes, non-fiscal taxes and service charges. Article 77 requires the establishment of a Commune/Sangkat Fund (CSF) in order to transfer national revenues and other revenues, with a specific formula established by sub-decree, to the commune/sangkat budget. The latter has been the sole main source of income that enables the local administration to perform its mandate. The transfer has increased from 2 percent of current national annual expenditure in 2003 to 2.8 percent in 2010, while revenues from taxes have not yet been realised, as fiscal decentralisation remains a work in progress (Niazi 2011; Pak 2011; Chheat 2013). This raises two questions: How can the sangkats deliver downward accountability? And if they cannot deliver, what strategies could they compare in order to, at least in the eyes of local people, maintain their legitimacy in local politics?

Box 1: Legal Frameworks Underpinning the Sangkat's Roles and Responsibilities

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The Law on the Administration and Management of Commune/Sangkat, 2001

Article 42: Commune/Sangkat shall have two types of roles as follows:
- The roles to serve local affairs for the interests of commune/Sangkat and its residents;
- The roles as an agent to represent the state under the appointment or delegation of power by the state authority.

Article 43: Concerning the roles to serve local affairs, commune/Sangkat shall have duties to:
- Maintain security and public orders;
- Arrange necessary public services and be responsible for the good process of those affairs;
- Encourage the creation of contentment and well-being of the citizens;
- Promote social and economic development and upgrade the living standards of the citizens;
- Protect and conserve the environment, natural resources and national culture and heritage;
- Reconcile concepts of citizens to have mutual understanding and tolerance;
- Perform general affairs to meet the needs of citizens.

Article 73: The Commune/Sangkat shall have its own financial resources, budgets and assets.

Article 74: The commune/Sangkat shall be entitled to own revenues from fiscal taxes, non-fiscal taxes and service charges.

The above taxes include land tax, tax on immovable properties and rental tax. In case that the Ministry of Economy and Finance collects direct revenues of commune/Sangkat, this collection shall be conducted in the name of commune/ Sangkat.

Types, levels and procedures for the collection of the above fiscal taxes, non-fiscal taxes and services charge shall be determined by a law.

Source: The Law on the Administration and Management of Commune/Sangkat, 2001

Since 2002, the CSF has financed road building and infrastructure development. With varying degrees of capacity, sangkats across the country have also secured other income sources such as from NGOs, charities and political parties. During our fieldwork, local councillors reported having alternative sources of income, albeit minimal; as one councillor said, "There are a few sources of funding – CSF, NGOs, CPP and charity".[23] Another source of income for local development projects is voluntary financial contributions from local residents. In one sangkat, we were told that

> Mostly rich people in this sangkat have contributed many resources, some via kinship connections with Cambodians living overseas. About five dirt and tar roads have been built with funds from charities. We were not involved that much and just played the role as facilitator – they [donors] normally implement the project themselves.[24]

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[23] Sangkat chief, Battambang, February 2012
[24] Sangkat chief, Battambang, February 2012

Moreover, as a way of maintaining its legitimacy in the local arena, the political party retains the upper hand in funding local development. Studies show that the support local infrastructure projects receive from the political party is as much as three times the annual fiscal transfer from central government (Pak and Craig 2011).

The broad and unclear mandate poses many challenges that hamper the sangkat's effectiveness. Councillors are highly aware of their accountability to their constituents (Chheat *et al*. 2011), but this is countered by limited power and resources. Furthermore, with their meagre budget transfers from central government, the prospect of sangkats being able to deliver service and accountability is likely to remain bleak in the near term. That said it is worth noting that due to their limited administrative experience, sangkat councils have been unable to spend all the resources available to them, thus building up a reserve fund of 20.3 percent during 2002-2007 (Niazi 2011).

This limited absorption capacity, combined with resource scarcity, has direct implications for sangkats' capacity to deliver. This was evident in all the local administrations we visited. Councillors commonly mentioned the scarcity of resources, as one explained,

> Our financial support is really small. Sangkat councillors are paid only 120,000 riels a month, the village chief is not paid enough, yet we use them every day. Another difficulty is the lack of office supplies. We do not have enough office equipment, not even a photocopying machine. The sangkat office is really small, only 5x5 metres. When we have a meeting of the full council, it always overflows onto the street.[25]

Under-resourced local administrations are therefore armed more with a commitment to respond to their constituents than with the power to execute it. The councils are staffed mainly by elected councillors and a clerk assigned by the Ministry of Interior, and some sangkats hire a few assistants to help process their paperwork load. While it is true that their legitimacy is at stake should they fail to respond to the needs of their constituents, local councillors must also find way to translate their quest for maintaining legitimacy with the upper echelons and the political party that put them up for election in the first place.

To offset its limited capacity to deliver and respond to local needs or to avoid responsibility, the local administration employs a range of methods. They often look to the upper echelons or their political patrons to deliver. The party's upper hand in delivering services to local people is seen as effective in maintaining political loyalty from the grassroots (Hughes 2012) and in retaining its legitimacy.[26] Political patronage is a big source of funding to offset the sangkats' financial constraints; in this context, local leadership seems to have a crucial role in mobilising financial support, as one councillor informed us,

> The process of attracting party funding is flexible according to the situation. In Khmer, we say any child who loves to cry would be likely to get more, meaning we have to be insistent in asking for what we want. We have to be informal and verbally express or chat to them first. If they show the green light, we come back to make a formal proposal via the party at the sangkat, then directly to the top leaders. There is always a meeting of some kind being hosted by a senior working group from the CPP in this town.[27]

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[25] Sangkat councillor, Stung Treng, September 2013
[26] Two sangkat councillors and sangkat chief, Battambang, February 2012
[27] Sangkat chief, Battambang, February 2012

Furthermore, to promote tolerance and help manage expectations of the goods and services they can deliver and when, sangkat councillors make sure that people understand the constraints affecting what can be feasibly accomplished and assure them of the potential future gains of properly organised and planned projects. One sangkat chief stated that

> We have no choice but to tell them that they will directly benefit from development projects in the future. Anyway, they understand that we have our limits.[28]

Lack of functional assignment also places sangkats in an awkward position when it comes to safeguarding people's interests through service delivery on the one hand and dealing with issues that might not necessarily lie, at least *de jure*, within their jurisdiction on the other. Informal settlements or slums in urban areas pose one such issue, which though beyond their mandate, does not appear to be the responsibility of any other body either. As reported by a councillor,

> The sangkat cannot address urban challenges such as slums or people building shelters on public land as it is beyond their mandate.[29]

Refuse collection is another concern that is not necessarily within the sangkat's jurisdiction, yet leaves them on the receiving end of blame from constituents when services are poor. For example, in Stung Treng town, the district (*krong*) authority is responsible for organising refuse collection. Townsfolk consider the service unsatisfactory since refuse is collected only once a week, but because the service is not the direct responsibility of the sangkat, there is little the sangkat councillors can practically do other than inform the district, municipal or khan authority.[30]

Trapped in this limbo, local authorities are keenly aware that their inability to improve service delivery and lack of decision-making power risks undermining their legitimacy. Even if they can call upon the nearest upper echelon to help address problems, there is no guarantee that resources will be made available. There is strong evidence that sangkat councillors make efforts to further people's interests or take problems to the municipal administration or relevant authorities. A phone call to the municipality office to intervene in refuse collection might get a positive response in one sangkat[31] but not necessarily in others.[32]

Sangkat roles in urban governance, especially the delivery of downward accountability, can be metaphorically seen as being trapped "between a crocodile and tiger". Asked about their capacity to respond to local problems, one sangkat councillor remarked,

> You need to note that there are many problems in urban areas and the local authority has to deal with powerful and high authorities. Normally, people face many problems and they just dump all of them on the sangkat councillors because they elected us and we live nearby. What do we lack? [We] need real power to help our people.[33]

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28   Sangkat chief, Kampong Thom, January 2013
29   Sangkat councillor, Battambang, February 2012
30   Municipality governor; sangkat chief; sangkat councillor, Stung Treng, September 2012; municipality councillor, Kampong Thom, January 2013; sangkat chief, Phnom Penh, December 2012; sangkat chief and deputy municipality governor, March 2013
31   Municipality councillor, Kampong Thom, January 2013
32   Sangkat chief, Siem Reap, March 2013; sangkat chief, Phnom Penh, December 2012
33   Sangkat chief, Battambang, February 2012

This analysis of weak downward accountability from the perspective of local councillors should not overshadow the fact that in a decentralised system, local citizens also ought to be empowered to demand accountability from their local representatives (Grindle 2011). Access to information on local government, in particular its resources, power and performance, is critical for enabling citizens to effectively voice their demands and hold public officials accountable (Grindle 2007) – a topic that requires further research.

3.4. Local Urban Government Responsiveness

While decentralisation has raised the bar for participation in local decision-making and civic engagement in local development programmes, local government has had a mixed record in terms of bringing added-value to infrastructure and service delivery. This mixed record is mainly due to institutional factors, resource constraints and the technicalities of some types of services (Wekwete 2007). Local governments with devolved power and resources can clearly act on behalf of local people in local development programmes. However, the success of decentralisation in service delivery rests on the clarity of functions and responsibilities among various levels of government and the allocation of corresponding resources needed to perform them (Wekwete 2007).

Sangkats perform their broad mandate as defined by the legal framework. At the time of writing, however, the sangkat had not been assigned specific service delivery functions. Arguably, this lag poses a formidable challenge to improving local authorities' capacities to perform as local agents for change and sustainable local development. The recommended functional mapping and reallocation of responsibilities to manage and deliver public services at local level remains a work in progress.

In spite of limited devolved powers, meagre resources and unclear functions, local administrations have sought to respond to local needs, *de facto*, as much as possible as they are aware that the responsibility ultimately rests with them (Plummer 2012). Physical rural infrastructure such as roads, canals, ditches and schools are generally viewed as development priorities for local citizens and political leaders (Plummer 2012). The breakdown of commune/sangkat expenditure for 2002-2007 shows that, on average, 56.4 percent went on local development, mainly small local infrastructure projects; 24 percent on salaries and allowances for councillors; and 17.4 percent on administrative and service expenditure, half of which entailed development projects (Niazi 2011).

In the absence of clear functional assignment, essential services common in urban areas such as electricity, water, slum upgrading and refuse collection lie beyond the *de jure* responsibilities of the sangkat. Sangkats have received complaints for late refuse collection, for example, but they could not address the issue other than reporting it to the upper administration. Not all problems reported to the municipal administration were resolved, however. Sangkat councillors listen to complaints from local residents about applications for electricity connection or failure of refuse collection services, for instance, but they have no direct role or say in ensuring approval or influencing outcomes. Even though such decisions are fully outside sangkats' mandate, their constituents usually hold them accountable.

Lack of capacity to respond to people's needs might explain the declining enthusiasm from the community to engage in local development planning. A councillor expressed his feelings about this, saying, "People participate in planning but we cannot respond to their demands".[34] The problem is exacerbated by meagre budgets. Overall, local authorities are strategic in prioritising

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[34] Sangkat councillor, Siem Reap, 2013

proposed local development plans and projects. In practice, they do not decide the allocation of the Commune/Sangkat Fund until after the District Integration Workshop, where they submit their list of priority projects to seek funding support from duty bearers including sub-national administration and NGOs (NCDD 2010b). One councillor proudly mentioned that

> We have a limited budget and therefore we respond only to the highest priorities such as roads and sewage pipes. Some roads we cannot build because of the technical requirements and people understand that. With this limitation, we calm them down and people understand us. We have so far met between 15-20 percent of the demands for concrete and paved roads.[35]

Sangkats mainly plan and implement small-scale physical infrastructure projects and their limited budget encourages them to plan strategically and for the long-term. Responding to the many needs of their local constituents can be daunting especially given the meagre annual transfer from central government. Therefore, the sangkat fund must be shared between many projects, leaving some that require a large amount of capital to be implemented in subsequent years. Road projects, for example, are normally capital intensive and cannot always be completed within the sangkat's annual planning cycle. Instead, roads are built in segments over several years, as confirmed by a councillor, "the council builds road stretch by stretch as our limited budget does not allow us to build one line at a time".[36]

As the reform progresses, the sangkats face a dilemma in that they must be able to respond to local needs. The lack of clarity in assignment of the sangkat's functions and responsibilities remains a critical policy priority that has to be addressed, then requisite financial powers would follow. That would strengthen the sangkat's role as local representative, especially in providing important local services. Before that can happen, however, the sangkat must at least intervene, *de facto*, by transmitting information on the challenges and issues their constituents face to relevant technical agencies and authorities at higher levels.

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[35] Sangkat chief, Siem Reap, March 2013
[36] Sangkat councillor, Siem Reap, March 2013

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CONCLUSION

It would be fair to say that this exploratory study of the impact of decentralisation on Cambodia's urban governance presents more questions than answers. This is not because the study itself has failed, but rather this attempt is one of the first to investigate how decentralisation is unfolding in urban areas in Cambodia and empirical literature on the topic remains scant.

Decentralisation reform in Cambodia has lived up to some areas of its early promise, as is evident in many aspects of local urban governance processes. It has provided space for local citizens to exercise their rights in decision-making and development. As well as electing their local councillors every five years, citizens can now take part in local decision-making through both formal and informal platforms. The formal annual planning exercise creates an opportunity for them to interact with their local councillors and express their thoughts on their communities' development.

From the perspectives of local councillors, the framework for citizen engagement and participation is bordering on failure as the number of local urban citizens that take part in local affairs has been steadily dwindling. The reality of low civic participation is considered a result of the socioeconomic conditions of urban areas, where people are preoccupied with making ends meet and other competitive economic activities. Local councillors have sought various approaches to encourage greater participation, though without much success. This pervasive low participation should not give local government a free rein to conduct their affairs, however, on the contrary, it suggests the need for policy to strengthen active civic engagement through innovative mechanisms and platforms that take into account urban realities. Empowerment of local citizens is usually considered one of the policy options to strengthen urban citizenship (Pieterse 2008; Grindle 2007).

Low participation is also clearly linked with the limitations local councils face in delivering downward accountability to their constituents. Decision-making power and resources clearly determine the likelihood of sangkats being fully downwardly accountable. "We do not have power and resources" was a common refrain among local councillors. This assertion is a reality in the urban locations we visited. The sangkat is not empowered to raise its own revenue as prescribed in its legal framework. Moreover, the national transfer that makes up their current budget is too small to enable them to respond effectively to local demands. With these restrictions, the dynamics of citizen-government relations becomes one of the critical ingredients to strengthen downward accountability. Some other aspects of the reform such as active citizenship and community mobilisation in demanding accountability from local government is a topic beyond the scope of our current investigation. An equally important aspect is whether people have access to information about local governments' affairs, their capacity, exercise of power and resources, and overall performance.

The slow yet steady progress is hardly surprising considering the ambitiousness of the reform. A strong and well-sequenced action plan has to be devised and implemented in order to reap the long-term benefits of the reform. Urban areas where local governance has assumed increasing regional, national and global importance are now the main battleground for policymakers and national leaders. In the meantime, socioeconomic realities must be taken into account in order to maximise the benefits of the reform. For sangkats, shortage

of financial and human resources is a way of life amid lags in national policy to clarify functions across various levels within the sub-national administration. Such clarity would enhance their role in local development and decision-making, especially in the urban context where proximity and space factors would have a big role to play in the functional assignment exercise.

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