

# Traditional Pagoda Associations and the Emergence of Civil Society in Cambodia

**Arnaldo Pellini looks at the experience from pagoda associations and their contribution to the emergence of Cambodian civil society and improved local governance\***

*This article analyses civil society associations in terms of traditional social capital, by looking at their potential to contribute to the emergence of a Cambodian civil society and improved local governance. The article looks at the experiences of the GTZ Rural Development Programme (GTZ RDP) with pagoda associations in the district of Stoung, Kompong Thom province. It argues that pagoda associations in the form of cash and rice associations have the potential to grow through their credit activities and are less dependent on external funding to implement community development activities. Moreover, their potential to represent community interests in local development and establish cooperation with commune councils can be enhanced through capacity building that focuses on learning by doing rather than theory and definitions of local governance.*

## Introduction

Development is a process of change. Whether it comes from within a society or is introduced through external support, the change is confronted with traditional values of the local culture. According to Pye (1999), three elements are fundamental to pluralistic democracy: civility, social capital and civil society.

**Civility** is defined by the norms of personal interaction that ensure social order and form and that integrate society. Pye argues that civility cannot be created by state policies but depends upon social pressure and the shame that comes from a sense of wrongdoing. In the Cambodian context, one may argue that interpersonal relationships are hierarchical and norms based on superior-inferior or patron-client relationships. Ovansen et al. (1996:34) therefore write that, in Cambodia, "the all-pervasive principle of Khmer social life is the notion of hierarchy. All social relationships are hierarchical ... the social order is felt to depend upon everybody observing this status hierarchy and keeping his/her place in it."

**Development is a process of change. Whether the change comes from within a society or is introduced through external support, the change is confronted with traditional values of the local culture.**

**Social capital** is the critical level of trust among the members of a society that makes collective action possible. Social progress implies "accumulation of binding sentiments of trust and reciprocity that can provide the basis for effective collective action. When social capital is positive the elite work for the common good. When social capital is negative corruption and mafia rule" (Pye 1999: 770). According to Ovansen et al. a sense of solidarity has never been strong in Khmer communities, always being overshadowed by individualism and the close personal link with families rather than the community. These patterns have been amplified by the trauma produced by decades of civil war and the Khmer Rouge regime. In Cambodian communities, trust is "a missing element of social cohesion and active participation in local decision-making processes" (UNICEF 1996: 33).

According to Pye (1999:764), civil society "is critical for the effective performance of democracy" and "the only way to manage the growth of interest is to permit a strong civil society" (*ibid*: 780). Therefore, *civil society* is defined as the diverse and autonomous interest groups that can exert pressure on the state. In this definition, it is possible to say that the idea of civil society in Cambodia is rather new and is emerging from the governance reform being implemented by the government. It is a social process slowly evolving alongside development, modernisation and the institutional reforms of the government. Since independence, Cambodian civil society has not been strong enough to exert pressure on the state.

At the village level, however, there is evidence of collective action organised mainly around pagodas. Traditionally, villages were linked with the pagoda considered as the social, cultural and religious centre (Aschmoneit et al. 1997). The accumulation of social capital has taken place around the pagoda, resulting in the creation of associations and committees. These groups suffered the consequences of war and political turmoil, but seem to be re-emerging now that peace has returned. This article looks at the experiences of the GTZ RDP with traditional pagoda associations in the district of Stoung, Kompong Thom province, and analyses their role.

## Characteristics of Pagoda Associations in Stoung District

GTZ has been working in Stoung since 1995, when the project decided to concentrate on four types of associations considered relevant to community development and poverty reduction. These were cash associations, rice associations, rice banks and funeral associations.

Pagoda associations are a traditional feature of local life throughout Cambodia. A study conducted in Stoung by Narak (1998) identified 29 different kinds of associations linked to pagodas. According to Aschmoneit et al. (1998: 7), these grassroots organisations are formed by villagers for mutual self-help activities, thus putting into practice the Buddha's teaching, "People must save themselves, by their own effort."

\* Arnaldo Pellini is working for DED (Deutscher Entwicklungsdienst – German Development Service) as civil society advisor in the GTZ Rural Development Programme in Kampong Thom.

Table 1: Associations in 2003 in Stoung District

Cash association in Pagoda	29
Cash association in Village	25
<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>
Rice association in Pagoda	14
Rice association in Village	24
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>
School associations	2

Narak also discovered that these groups were active at the community level before 1970, when the civil war started.

Most of them closed during the Khmer Rouge regime, but returned, although controlled by the state, during the People's Republic of Kampuchea from 1979 to 1989. Today they are no longer under state control and represent the traditional self-help activities that Khmer communities organize around pagodas. The size of the associations varies from 50 to 200 members, with an average of 120. Each association has a management committee of five to seven elected members.

The main task of the associations is to provide small loans in the form of rice and cash to the members. Credits average \$10–15 or 50 kg of rice. The interest paid by the end of the credit cycle (six months for cash and 12 months for rice) is 5 percent per month for cash and 30 percent per month for rice. Sixty percent of the clients are poor, and most loans are used for small income-generating activities. When a person is not able to repay the credit fully, the amount that has not been paid is transferred to the next cycle as a new credit. An association committee can cancel the debt of a person who is not able to pay back due to exceptional circumstances such as accident, illness or natural disaster.

In 1997, a Pagoda Coordination Committee (Pacoco) was formed to coordinate among associations and to be an intermediary between associations and donors. The members are in principle elected, although this seems not always to be the case. (During the first election in 1997, two women candidates received the highest number of votes, but one of the male candidates was chosen as president because this was culturally more acceptable.) The main task of Pacoco is “to provide opportunities to the poor people to make them more and more capable to help themselves to fight against poverty; [and] encourage member associations to improve and rehabilitate the appropriate infrastructure for the benefit of both civil society and religion in their own areas” (Pacoco 1999).

Pacoco members meet monthly and provide ongoing informal advice to the associations and their committees. They are responsible for a number of associations/committees throughout a *development area* determined by the distribution of associations rather than by communal boundaries. While all the cash and rice associations were originally in pagodas, many are now also based in villages and schools. The number of associations increased substantially between 1997 and 2003, from 42 to 54 cash associations and from 34 to 38 rice associations.

The increased number of associations reflects external support. In 1997 the project contributed to the start-up capital of 22 new associations in 10 pagodas with approximately \$9,200 and 81,300 kg of rice. After this initial period, the support of GTZ to pagoda associations was reduced due to the expansion of RDP activities in 1998 to

include agriculture, rural infrastructure development and community development. Staff previously responsible for pagoda associations were assigned to community development tasks such as the establishment of road maintenance committees and water user groups. One staff member was left to follow the pagoda associations in Stoung. Until 2002, project support consisted mainly of training in simple accounting and in the use of monitoring forms for loan disbursements/repayments.

In 2002 the election of commune councils provided a new scenario for pagoda associations. The GTZ project brought pagoda associations under the responsibility of the newly established civil society component staffed by a DED (Deutscher Entwicklungs Dienst—German Development Service) international adviser and a local employee, in addition to the community development staff of the district Rural Development Office in Stoung. Project support since then has focussed more on capacity building of commune councils and the role that associations can play in local governance. Financial support in 2003 was

limited to \$1,315 and covered mainly travel costs for training in pagodas and a study visit to Kandal for Pacoco members to meet and observe village/pagoda associations supported by an international NGO. After the study visit, Pacoco members developed new ideas: associations to rent

Table 2: Capital of Associations

	Rice (Kg)	Rice Avg (Kg)
1997	98,140	7,346
2001	308,516	na
2002	231,980	6,105
2003	343,148	9,030
	Cash (riels)	Cash Avg.
1997	43,700,000	4,537,353
2001	204,180,900	na
2002	432,129,127	8,002,391
2003	377,281,030	6,796,715

1 USD = 3,900 riels

the harvest season at a lower cost (funded by the embassy of Japan), associations similar to cooperatives to buy bulk rice seed and fertilisers to sell to association members at lower prices and pig associations. Project proposals have been prepared and presented to donor representatives who visited Stoung.

Despite reduced financial support (compared to 1997), new associations have been set up, and the total and average capital of the associations has also grown (Table 2). According to Sasse (1998:104), this shows that “the value of the project lies in its achievement to alleviate poverty by strengthening these traditional grassroots organisations.” She adds that “existing self-help groups are very sustainable, because they have their own purpose, management and funding base in the community ... the management of these groups is often more trusted and more reliable than newly created groups due to the fact that committee members work primarily for merit and not for

Table 3: Cash and Rice Association Beneficiaries 2003

Rice	Capital (Kg)	Households	People	Women	Poor families
38	343,148	2,154	10,797	5,875	1,241
Avg. capital	9,030				
Cash	Capital	Households	People	Women	Poor families
54	367,022,631	4,766	6,159	7,833	2,080
Avg. capital	6,796,715				

Source: Pacoco 2003

1 US\$ = 3,900 Riels

profit" (*ibid*). Moreover, the associations represent a large part of the population (Table 3) and therefore have the potential to exert pressure on local government if they are given the opportunity to do so.

Once the associations are provided with an initial capital and capacity to manage the credits and community contributions, the capital can grow together with the number of households reached. At this point, external financial support can be reduced and concentrated on different kinds of capacity building.

### **The Role of Pagoda Associations in Civil Society**

Pagoda associations in Cambodia have survived political and social turmoil. This shows that social capital exists and that there is a potential to strengthen collective actions starting from traditional institutions. Therefore it is useful to analyse pagoda associations in terms of civility, social capital and civil society to understand what role they can play.

#### ***Civility: Leadership and Individual Relationships within Associations***

The hierarchy that characterises the civility of Khmer society is reflected in the organisational structure of the associations. Leadership seems to be the one element that makes the difference between dynamic and static associations. *Achars* (laymen) with stronger personalities are the ones who know better how to mobilise communities. The problem is that *achars* may not always be up to the tasks they are supposed to manage or may lack the skills to participate actively in planning meetings. Stronger *achars* are likely to receive training from NGOs and donors, thus making their positions in associations even stronger. An additional problem observed in Kompong Thom is that community leaders tend to be nominated for a range of committees set up by various projects or international organisations, thus overburdening them.

***Social Capital: Diversification of Associations and Collective Action*** Sustainability also means reduction of risks. For associations, a diversification of traditional credit activities into new areas would diversify risks and therefore reduce dependence on external support. Experience from Pacoco indicates that one of the best ways to strengthen knowledge and develop new ideas is to give people the opportunity to meet others involved in similar activities. Study visits to other provinces have proven to be the best way for Pacoco members to come up with ideas for new associations. This approach can lead to more collective action and strengthen local social capital.

***Civil Society: Role of Pagoda Associations*** The structure of pagoda associations reflects the hierarchical norms of Khmer society, and the trust that links the associations' members represents the social capital of traditional institutions. The 2002 commune council elections and the decentralisation reform being implemented by the government are now providing an opportunity for traditional associations to exert some pressure on local government and act as civil society representatives. Pagoda associations enjoy trust from their members and therefore can be considered legitimate spokespersons for community needs to commune councils, can be involved in local planning or

can contribute their capital to the funding of small projects. To do this, they have to become more familiar with the new decentralised environment and the opportunities linked to their new role.

***Capacity Building*** The support from the GTZ civil society component for pagoda associations in Stoung now concentrates on strengthening the associations' role as community representatives in local governance, for example by explaining the importance of participating in the monthly commune council meetings, presenting the results of their credit activities and inviting councillors to visit and observe associations. During 2003 Pacoco members received training to clarify definitions and concepts of decentralisation, to provide them with theoretical understanding that was then to be translated into their daily work. An evaluation conducted in 2003 concluded that Pacoco members are increasingly involved in aspects of development work outside of traditional cash and rice associations, some as councillors and others as "focal points" of community development. According to the study, the "widespread network of rice and cash associations and committees means that Pacoco members are in a position to promote grassroots participation in local governance and community development in Stoung district" (Warthon 2003: 3). However, the study found that there has been almost no formal transfer of knowledge between Pacoco, associations and commune council members. The experience of Stoung suggests that project support needed to change from training to focus on learning by doing, facilitating cooperation between associations and commune councils in planning and implementing small-scale projects. This is now being complemented by capacity building in advocacy and dissemination of information, by development of simple educational posters and leaflets and by supporting meetings in pagodas at which association members can exchange experiences among themselves and with commune councils.

### **Conclusions**

Bonnal has written of the relationship between social capital, traditional community institutions and decentralisation that "past attempts at greater decentralisation have largely failed to take into account the vital dimension of local institutions" (1997:1). In Cambodia at present, there is an extraordinary effort by the government and international donors to improve the capacity and skills of commune council members. Pacoco and the associations represent traditional civil society organisations and have an important role to play in promoting local governance, particularly in the case of credit activities that enable them to fund themselves and to represent the interests of a large number of households. They therefore need to be targeted and involved in specific capacity building organised by donors and government institutions. The experience from Stoung suggests that the support should concentrate on basic issues such as attendance and participation in commune council meetings using simple training materials and, more importantly, on supporting exchange visits inside and outside the province. This will allow traditional pagoda associations



to play an active role in local governance and establish mutual support with commune councils.

## References

- Aschmoneit, W., et al. (1997). *Pagoda Committees and Community Life in Kampong Thom Province Cambodia*, Kompong Thom: GTZ Self-Help Team
- Aschmoneit, W. (1998) *Traditional Self-Help Associations in Cambodia: How to Identify and Cooperate with Them*, Eschborn (Germany): GTZ
- Bonnal, J. (1997). "Relating Social Capital, Traditional Community Institutions and Decentralisation Processes," prepared for the Technical Consultation on Decentralization, FAO, Rome, 16-18 December 1997
- Narak, S. (1998), "Historically Rooted Organizations in the Traditional Rural Community in Stung District, Kampong Thom province, Cambodia," Internal Report, GTZ Provincial Development Programme, Kompong Thom
- Ovensen, J., Trankell, I. and Öjendal, J. (1996), *When Every Household Is an Island: Social organisation and power structures in rural Cambodia*, Uppsala Research Report in Cultural Anthropology, No. 15, Stockholm: Department of Cultural Anthropology, Uppsala University and Sida
- Pagoda Coordination Committee (Pacoco) (1999), "Statute of the Pagoda Coordination Committee," Stoung (Cambodia)
- Pye, L.W. (1999), "Civility, Social Capital, and Civil Society: Three Powerful Concepts for Explaining Asia," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XXIX, 4, pp. 762-82
- Sasse, R. (1998), "GTZ/Provincial Development Program Kampong Thom, Self-Help Component, Report of Internal Evaluation," Kompong Thom
- Sokha, P. (2000), Speech at the NGO Forum Workshop on the Impacts of Decentralisation and Elected Commune Councils on the Development Programs of NGOs held in Phnom Penh 31 Aug-1 Sep 2000
- UNICEF (1996), *Towards a Better Future: an analysis of the situation of children and women in Cambodia*, Phnom Penh: UNICEF
- Warthon, D. (2003), "Assessment and identification of the role and potential of the Pagoda Coordination Committee (Pacoco) on issues related to local governance and cooperation with Commune Councils: Summary of findings and recommendations," Kompong Thom: GTZ RDP

Continued from page 4

## Can Land Titles Help...

ity, (b) the availability of credit, extension, health care and other social services, (c) infrastructure development and (d) location relative to transport and markets. The benefits for households and society are likely to be greatest in areas with active land markets and easy access to development services. The contribution of land titles to rural development and poverty reduction can be optimised by targeting land titling efforts in areas where government agencies, NGOs and other donors and private investors are active.

The benefits from land titles also depend on household characteristics. Landholding size and the gender of the household head are good indicators of a household's potential to benefit from the titling programme. We expect that households with smaller holdings, including female-headed households, can benefit from more secure land tenure under favourable circumstances. However, households with larger landholdings are in a better initial position to benefit even more. The benefits for disadvantaged and vulnerable households can be enhanced by more specific targeting of areas where social services and development resources are focused on the poor. This is of particular concern for households that subsist on the precipice of landlessness.

The benefits for disadvantaged households can also be increased by policies that link land titling to pro-poor development objectives. Two potential policy areas are credit and public finance. For example, policies and practices that sustain higher interest rates in the formal sector undermine potential benefits from land titles by discouraging people from obtaining credit. Policies aimed at reducing interest rates would improve credit access for small landholders. Meanwhile, large untaxed

idle landholdings encourage land speculation and conflicts, and impede land use diversification and higher utilization rates. A tax on unused land over a certain size would reduce these problems as well as provide revenue for the government.

## Endnote

1. The data covers both wet and dry season rice production. Dry season rice, however, represents only a small proportion of total rice production in the survey sample.

## References

- Biddulph, Robin (2004), "Poverty and Social Impact Assessment of Social Land Concessions in Cambodia: Landlessness Assessment," Phnom Penh: Oxfam GB
- Chan Sophal and Sarthi Acharya (2002), *Facing the Challenges of Rural Livelihoods: A Perspective from Nine Villages in Cambodia*, Working Paper 25, Phnom Penh: Cambodia Development Resource Institute
- Feder, Gershon and David Feeney (1996), "The Theory of Land Tenure and Property Rights," in Karla Hoff, Avishay Braverman and Joseph E. Stiglitz (eds.), *The Economics of Rural Organization: Theory, Practice, and Policy*, World Bank, Oxford University Press
- Munro-Faure, Paul (2003), "Regularization of Property Rights and Rural Development: Challenges for Latin America," [www.for.nta.gob.mx/ponencias/Faure.PFD](http://www.for.nta.gob.mx/ponencias/Faure.PFD)
- Onchan, Tongroj and Saroj Aungsumalin (2002), *Socio-Economic and Environmental Impact of the Land Titling Program*, Kasetsart University, Thailand
- So Savanarith, Chan Sophal and Sarthi Acharya (2001), "An Assessment of Land Tenure in Rural Cambodia," *Cambodia Development Review*, Vol. 5, Issue 4, (Phnom