Urban Governance in Decentralised Cambodia: An Under-researched Topic?[1]

Introduction

This article argues that urban governance merits deeper study in the unfolding of decentralisation reform in Cambodia. It has been a decade since the first commune/ *sangkat* council election and many institutional and behavioural changes have since taken place. A review of literature shows that although democratic decentralisation reforms in Cambodia have received ample attention, most of the research on this topic is indifferent to urban reality. In-depth interviews with policy-makers and local councillors as part of the preliminary work for a study on urban governance shed light on the importance of a spatial review of geographical typology in Cambodia, in this case, rural vs. urban, to maximising the effective targeting of policy in different contextual locations within the boundary of local government. The article begins by defining "urban" and "urban governance", followed by a brief review of decentralisation in Cambodia. The third section introduces the rationale and research questions along with a research framework that will serve as the road map for the project. It then includes a section on insights from preliminary fieldwork before concluding with a few words on the need for spatially sensitive policy to address issues common in urban areas.

What is the 'Urban' in Urban Governance?

As this article pays particular heed to the urban setting, it is important to elaborate what we mean by "urban" in urban governance. Urban can be defined through administrative criteria, population size/density, economic functions, or infrastructure and services. Many cities in Asia, including in Cambodia, have been thus defined. In Cambodia, one of the readily available definitions came as a result of the reclassification of urban areas in 2004 by the Ministry of Planning, which defines urban areas according to three criteria: i) population density exceeds 200 per km², ii) male employment in agriculture below 50 percent, and iii) total population above 2,000 (NIS 2004)[2]. The issue is that this definition is not necessarily universally accepted across government agencies and other stakeholders. This article views urban not only through infrastructure and high population attributes, but also through intangible and subtle features. This view takes an anthropological approach to the urban setting, where the term refers to the high spatial density of social relations (Gutkind 1974). It is not the density of population, but the *density of social relations* that is the focus of anthropologists. Bringing such understanding of social relations into the debate throws the concept of governance into a new light and raises the question whether we need to re-conceptualise urban governance.

Governance can be defined simply as "the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels" (UNDP 2003: 170). So, does urban governance mean the management of urban affairs? The UNESCO definition (quoted in Kaufman *et al.* 2005: 7) views urban governance as "the processes that steer and take into account the various links between stakeholders, local authorities and citizens. It involves bottom-up and top-down strategies to favour active participation of communities concerned, negotiation among actors, transparent decision-making mechanisms, and innovation in strategies of urban management policies". At the core of this definition are the relationships between different actors which include not only the government and citizens, but also other stakeholders such as private sector and non-governmental organisations. The implication of considering a wider scope of actors involved in governance is echoed by other scholars (Ojendal & Dellnas 2010). As implied above, these relationships are thought to occur more frequently in an urban setting. This definition serves as an overall framework to understand urban governance in general, but it is rather broad in that it does not specify exactly what influences the everyday interactions between those stakeholders. Although urbanisation in Cambodia is in its infancy and urban areas might still retain some of the characteristics necessary for successful local governance, this article agrees with Ojendal and

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[2] The commune is the unit of calculation to determine whether it is qualified to be "urban" or "rural". Conventionally, sangkat refers to an urban commune, but if the 2004 definition is applied, not all sangkats in Cambodia's 26 municipalities qualify as urban; see http://db.ncdd.gov.kh/cdbonline/home/index.castle (accessed 26 May 2012)

Dellnas (2010) that it is difficult to transpose a local governance model onto a (modern) urban setting.

Brief Decentralisation Context

Cambodia embarked on decentralisation reform to address political legitimacy and improve economic development through forging local participation in decision making and holding local government accountable. The first commune elections were held in 2002. Commune/*sangkat* councillors are directly elected for a five-year mandate according to the proportional electoral system based on the party list. Specific objectives of the reform include enhancing local democracy, improving service delivery to local people and bettering the livelihoods of local people (RGC 2005). Starting in 2009, district, municipal, capital and provincial level councillors are elected by commune/*sangkat* councillors. In principle, district and provincial councillors are supposed to be accountable to the commune/*sangkat* councillors who elected them (Organic Law 2008), but the reality is still questionable (Chheat *et al.* 2011). Within this new framework, the local councils consult and represent the views of local people on local planning so that they can be responsive to local needs. The law provides that they are accountable to the people; however, limited allocation of financial resources hinders their genuine accountability towards their electorates. That the budget transfer is still meagre means that fiscal decentralisation has yet to materialise (Pak 2011).

While the decision to undertake this bold political and administrative reform was highly praised for the eventual contribution to development underpinned by theoretical foundations (Öjendal 2005), a number of challenges remain. These include legal framework, institutional design and mechanisms for sub-national governments to coordinate and support commune councils (Rusten *et al*. 2004). The reform has been credited for its contribution to local democracy and poverty reduction (Öjendal & Kim 2011, 2011a) and has allowed space for women's involvement in local government, but other aspects of the reform could still be improved (Manor 2008). Even though a clear mandate and functions were set in the legal framework, the communes/*sangkats* have only performed minor tasks such as civil registration, basic conflict resolution, and socio-economic data collection for various national agencies (Kim & Henke 2005). Politically sensitive topics such as land, forest and natural resource management remain beyond their reach despite the

provisions for delegating such responsibility and authority to them as stipulated in the legal framework (Kim & Ojendal 2011).

This backdrop to the reform has been unveiling as socio-economic changes have affected Cambodia for better or worse. Cambodian urban population is projected to increase at a high rate of 3.5 percent per annum reaching 8 million or 35 percent of the population by 2030. Rapid urbanisation is leading to growing urban deficiencies and problems such as limited public services, squatter settlements and environmental pollution (Benghong 2006; OCM, undated). Decentralisation is believed to assist in addressing these problems (Devas 2004). However, the reality on the ground has yet to be assessed.

Why Urban Governance?

Despite its recent vibrant economic growth, Cambodia is still a developing country and development assistance is still very much needed. However, it is rather alarming to note that most development assistance has been directed towards rural areas where poverty is the most prevalent, to the detriment of urban poverty which has been somewhat overlooked. If urban issues are to be properly addressed, more competent and capable urban local governance together with spatially sensitive decentralisation policy are called for. In this section, we discuss a number of reasons why more attention must be paid to urban governance.

First, that urban governance has been treated indifferently in research on democratic governance and decentralisation in Cambodia is illustrated by a number of key studies. Blunt and Turner's (2005) article arguing that socio-cultural and institutional context in Cambodia is ill-fitted for decentralisation reform seems to completely neglect the differences between rural and urban areas. Similarly, the urban reality is overlooked in Smoke and Morrison's (2008) evaluation of decentralisation progress in Cambodia. The report discusses whether decentralisation reform in Cambodia is a means to consolidate central power or to create a platform for downward accountability towards the citizens, but it seems to conflate the urban and rural realities; there is no examination of the conditions common in the urban setting that either propel or hinder decentralised urban governance. A great sense of optimism pervades Ojendal and Kim's (2011) report on the progress towards genuine democratic decentralisation in Cambodia, but urban reality does

not feature in this optimistic picture. They argue that such optimism can be attributed to the fact that the reform came from within (Ojendal & Kim 2011), as opposed to being imported wholesale. These studies have one shortcoming in common that there is a lack of or even the omission of urban spatial dimensions in their analyses of socio-political phenomena or the theoretical topics they investigated. Just a few examples are discussed here, but this argument resonates across the whole body of literature on this issue. This goes to show that in the sphere of research on local administration in Cambodia, there is still a vacuum to be filled on governance in the urban setting.

Second, how much the decentralisation policy, which led to the establishment of the new sub-national government structure, incorporates the complexity and diversity of the urban setting is unknown. The new provincial/district councils and their functions and duties were set up against a background of rapid urbanisation that accompanied sustained economic growth in Cambodia. Poverty in urban areas is a structural phenomenon that is partly pushed by the pressure of job loss and traditional way of life in rural areas and partly pulled by the attractive way of life in the cities and economic opportunities promoted by the neo-liberal economic system. The urban poor mainly live in slum areas where basic services are lacking due to deprivation or the low capacity of urban government. Their participation in local planning and decision-making that would affect their lives has rarely been valued by the city government, a situation that even further marginalises these people (Devas 2004). A careful look into Cambodia's reform as it evolves in the urban setting will shed light on civic participation and how it has been understood.

Lastly, what the government would need to ensure successful decentralisation policy implementation, especially in urban settings, might not have received adequate attention.[3] The government's everyday implementation of decentralisation reform appears to lack spatially sensitive policy recommendations and suggestions on how to deal with rapid urban growth. While the relative success of local development through decentralisation and deconcentration reforms during the last decade is undeniable, the current

"spatially blind" policy towards development and poverty reduction does not allow the maximisation of government intervention. To turn this trend around, UNCDF (2010) reports there is a policy need to address the specific challenges facing rural and urban provinces or communes.

Preliminary Field Insights

Our preliminary fieldwork in Kampot and Battambang provinces has enriched our understanding of the socio-economic and geographical situations and current state of local administration in the urban setting.[4] While potential improvements in service delivery capacity and financial income have been identified, the many challenges facing the current local administration in delivering and performing their mandate in urban areas require systematic study so as to understand the complexity of these issues and how to address them.

Indeed, the definition renders the socio-economic situation in urban settlements different from that in rural settings and is an expression of the linkage between the two. Most urban dwellers are vendors, civil servants or waged/salaried workers, and many are migrants from rural areas. Such composition poses a huge challenge to local governments mobilising citizen participation in local decision-making and dialogue. It also creates an environment where local councillors are expected to perform in a way that is acceptable and beneficial to rich or well-connected urbanites, though this social group tend to bypass local authority whenever they need services due to their closeness to the upper echelons of the state who still retain responsibility for service delivery. While such close proximity could encourage better cooperation between different levels of sub-national government, it also creates confusion in an environment where the roles and functions of each level have yet to be clarified.

The proximity and space also necessitates inter-*sangkat* interaction and cooperation in delivering services and addressing social problems. The construction of physical infrastructure such as water supply pipes and sewers, roads and powerlines, services that are of utmost importance for urban lives, requires strong cooperation and understanding between *sangkats*. Likewise, the same approach is required to address social issues such as gangs, crime, immigration and pollution.

As part of a campaign for more efficient and

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[3] Interview with H.E. Leng Vy, Head of Department of Local Administration, Ministry of Interior, 4 May 2012.

[4] Fieldwork was conducted in Kampot on 19-20 January 2012 and in Battambang on 8-10 February 2012.

effective service delivery within the framework of decentralisation reform, One Window Service Offices (OWSO) is an alternative mechanism to provide services at district/municipality level (Thon *et al.* 2010). It promotes a concept of service delivery and transparency within the state system. Such modality might be considered an effective mechanism to delegate certain functions to the *sangkat* councils for them to be more responsive to local needs. The *sangkat* councils in urban areas play a critical role in registering property and collecting property tax, newly introduced in urban areas. Such potential in service delivery and revenue should provide a better insight into the urban socio-economic environment where local government has a high stake.

The multi-party system has been criticised for "window-dressing" democratic politics in Cambodia. In local urban government, decision-making within the council falls short of dialogue or consultation across the political affiliation. Opposition party councillors are very often ignored in decision-making, engagement with development partners such as private sector and non-governmental organisations and official functions. Moreover, the concept of "civil society" is yet to be widely or evenly understood in the urban setting, from being hardly heard of in urban *sangkats* in Kampot to its role being frequently mentioned in urban governance in Battambang's provincial town.

CDRI Proposed Research

Having identified this knowledge gap, CDRI has designed a study to examine urban governance in decentralised Cambodia. This research seeks to answer the question: How has decentralisation policy affected urban governance in Cambodia? Specifically, it will look at how the reform has affected local government's accountability and responsiveness to local citizens and how the latter have responded and participated in local decision-making processes in the context of decentralisation.

The conceptual research framework is particularly mindful of the spatial dimensions of social relations that influence relationships between actors. This complex, yet important, process of connecting authority and citizens can then be understood through three major concepts commonly found in the literature on governance and decentralisation: *accountability, responsiveness* and *participation*. This study approaches these concepts from a spatial dimension, that is, with an understanding that they occur within the dense space of an urban environment as opposed to the more abundant space of a rural setting. It is critical that space is seen as *the focus* of these concepts, rather than the commonly perceived notion as *the locus* where these concepts manifest. *Participation* in local politics and development is a crucial aspect of democratic decentralisation. It allows citizens to engage and to express their preferences/voices 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 council/leaders and have a better sense of ownership (Kim 2012).

Accountability refers to being answerable for actions (Grindle 2011). It could be defined as an obligation to answer for actions according to a particular framework (Kim & Ojendal 2012) or the use of authority (Moncrieff 2001). There are at least three factors that citizens should hold elected officials accountable for their actions: (i) citizens can use the vote effectively to reward or punish officials' general or specific performance; (ii) citizens can generate response to their collective needs from local governments; and (iii) citizens can be assured of fair and equitable treatment from public agencies at local levels (Grindle 2011). The term as it is used in democratic decentralisation in Cambodia refers to three different kinds of accountability: upward, horizontal and downward (Hughes & Devas 2007; Kim 2012).

Responsiveness refers to the authorities' ability to fulfil their own promises (rather than inflating expectations of constituents). Responsiveness is the ability to provide what people demand, for example material outputs and local services. It is thus a matter of being answerable to local interests, which in Cambodia's case requires knowledge of local conditions (Kim 2012). Manor has defined the practices of responsiveness in three ways: (i) the *speed* of response usually increases because elected councils at lower levels have enough independent power to react quickly to problems and pleas that arise from ordinary people; (ii) the *quantity* of responses also increases because councils tend to stress many small projects rather than the much smaller number of large projects which higher authorities favour; 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.

Final Words

This article argues that urban governance has been largely neglected in the overall democratic decentralisation framework in Cambodia, not only in terms of policy but also in terms of research. As Cambodia's urbanisation is moving forward fast, there is an urgent need for a decentralisation policy that is sensitive to socio-economic, spatial and geographical differences. Urbanisation in Cambodia is still in its very early stage, and thus there is still plenty of room to ascertain successful urban governance. Therefore, ample attention should be paid now to better train and equip urban local government with proper resources and tools to tackle issues common in a big metropolis such as congestion, pollution and slums. With its awareness of space, the Urban Governance Project is a modest initiative to contribute to the knowledge base and to inform the debate on decentralisation reform in Cambodia with immediacy, richness and policy responsiveness.

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