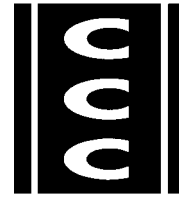


***Special Research
Report***

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សហប្រតិបត្តិការ
និងជំនួយ
Cooperation Committee
for Cambodia
Comité de Coopération
pour le Cambodge



**Experiences of Commune Councils in Promoting
Participatory Local Governance**

Case Studies from Five Communes



**Analyzing Development Issues
Team and Research Participants**

March 2004

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Abstract

This Analyzing Development Issues (ADI) study examines the experiences of Commune Councils in promoting participatory local governance. Five case studies are presented. Areas for investigation include changes in commune administration, processes undertaken in planning and implementing development activities, partnerships between Commune Councils and civil society, and Commune Council relationships with national government representatives and agencies and with political parties. The study documents achievements that have occurred in each of these areas, and identifies challenges in each that need to be addressed.

With respect to challenges, several key findings emerge. Specially, the Commune Councils had largely failed to establish rapport with ordinary villagers. The projects financed by the commune funds had limited impact on poverty reduction. NGO parallel programs had the potential to disable Commune Council efforts. Party loyalties had undermined the effectiveness of some Commune Councils. Gains in local democracy ultimately required broad societal change. Despite these drawbacks, the study concludes that the early experience of the Commune Councils offered much enthusiasm for broad based support of the decentralization reform program. While progress to date had been uneven and less than inclusive, much had been achieved in a relatively short period of time.

Abbreviations

ADI	Analyzing Development Issues
CARERE	Cambodia Resettlement and Rehabilitation Project
CBRD	Capacity Building for Rural Development
CCSP	Commune Council Support Project
CDP	Commune Development Plan
CDRI	Cambodia Development Resource Institute
CEDAC	Centre d'Étude et de Développement Agricole
CIDSE	Cooperation Internationale pour le Développement et la Solidarité
CPP	Cambodia People's Party
DFT	District Facilitating Team
DIW	District Integration Workshop
DOLA	Department of Local Administration
E&D	Enfants et Développement
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
GTZ	Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit
HEKS	Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirchen Schweiz
ICD	Integrated Community Development
IFSP	Integrated Food Security Program
NGO	Non Government Organization
PBC	Planning and Budgeting Committee
PLG	Partnership for Local Governance
POLA	Provincial Office for Local Administration
PRA	Participatory Rural Assessments
RACHA	Reproductive and Child Health Alliance
RDRP	Rural Development and Rehabilitation Program
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VDC	Village Development Committee
WFP	World Food Programme
WVC	World Vision Cambodia

Introduction

Since the Commune Council election in February 2002 the elected Commune Council officials have been challenged to put into practice the decentralization policies mandated by the national government. This includes not only administrative reform but also involvement in development planning and implementation. Realistically, the Commune Councils will need time to fully perform the roles expected of them. Nevertheless, progress has already been made in several aspects of the decentralization process, especially by Commune Councils that have received more intensive support from government programs and external organizations.

This special research study of the Analyzing Development Issues (ADI) Project examines the experiences of Commune Councils receiving strong support from external agencies. Five case studies are presented highlighting the experience of five communes each selected and supported by one of the following groups: World Vision Cambodia (Takeo), Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) (Kampot), Cooperation Internationale pour le Développement et la Solidarité (CIDSE) (Kampot), Partnership for Local Governance (PLG) (Pursat), and Concern Worldwide (Pursat).¹ Areas for investigation include changes in commune administration, processes undertaken in planning and implementing development activities, partnerships between Commune Councils and civil society, and Commune Council relationships with national government representatives and agencies and with political parties. The research documents and compares the experiences in the five communes and explores the lessons learned in promoting participatory local governance. As such the research seeks to contribute to the broader effort of strengthening the decentralization process in Cambodia.

Objectives

1. To identify changes that have taken place in commune administration since the election of the Commune Councils.
2. To examine processes undertaken by the Commune Councils in areas of planning and implementing development activities.
3. To explore the nature and extent of partnerships emerging between Commune Councils and civil society.
4. To assess the nature of relationships with national government representatives and agencies and with political parties.

Key Questions

Changes in Commune Administration

1. Have changes taken place in commune administration since the Commune Council elections?
2. What has changed? What has remained the same?
3. How do various commune stakeholders view these developments?

¹ It should be noted that the support received by these communes is not solely from the selecting agency. PLG provides support to the government's Seila program in all five communes while Concern Worldwide works in the commune chosen by PLG.

Processes in Planning and Implementing Activities

1. Have Commune Councils and Planning and Budgeting Committees been able to undertake development planning? What has been their approach? What have they achieved? What are the factors that affect their performance in development planning?
2. Have Commune Councils and Planning and Budgeting Committees been able to implement development activities? What has been their approach? What have they accomplished? What are the factors that affect their ability to implement activities?

Partnerships Between Commune Councils and Civil Society

1. To what extent have partnerships emerged between Commune Councils and civil society? What are the specific areas of collaboration and coordination?
2. What factors contribute to the promotion (or non-promotion) of Commune Council and civil society partnerships?
3. How does the participation or non-participation of civil society affect the quality of local governance?

Relationships with National Government and Political Parties

1. Do the Commune Councils have direct relationships with national government representatives? How do these relationships (or lack of relationships) affect their performance?
2. How do Commune Councils relate with district governors? With representatives of national line agencies? How do these relationships affect Commune Council performance?
3. Do the Commune Councils have affiliations with more than one political party? How do these relationships affect Commune Council performance?

Literature Review

In July 2001 David Ayers, the then leader of the Commune Council Support Project (CCSP), conducted a literature review of some 100 literature sources highlighting issues in decentralization seen to be instructive to Cambodia.² Key insights emerging from the review are presented here to place the research questions of this study within a broader context.

The CCSP review identifies four conditions for successful decentralization: 1) Clearly established legal framework; 2) Institutions with capacity; 3) System of accountability; and 4) An active civil society. In short, the legal framework should delineate the decentralized institutions, demonstrate how they are to be constituted, and make clear how they relate to other institutions. The decentralized institutions also need to have the capacity to execute the powers and responsibilities devolved to them, which includes adequate funding and the ability to provide improved service delivery. The decentralized system must likewise ensure that people actively participate in local government decision-making and are able to monitor the performance of local officials. In this regard, a vibrant civil society promotes the voice of people in local governance and seeks to hold officials accountable. The CCSP review thus infers that the design of decentralization reforms should incorporate: 1) A political and legislative framework that is simple and widely supported within government; 2) Adequate fiscal arrangements; 3) Mechanisms to enhance transparency; and 4) Mechanisms to encourage civil society participation.

The CCSP literature review also considers the potential benefits of decentralization. It cites several areas where decentralization has considerable promise. For one, decentralization is

² David Ayers, *Decentralisation: A Review of the Literature*, (Phnom Penh: Commune Council Support Project, July 2001).

seen to enhance institutional development at lower levels. It is also seen to promote greater people's participation in governance issues. Where decentralization takes place as part of democratic reform, it has the potential to enhance the responsiveness of government institutions. It likewise tends to increase the flow of information between government and people. In addition, decentralization has been shown to support the sustainability of development projects, to enhance the transparency of government institutions, to promote greater accountability of officials to their constituencies, and to provide more opportunities for involvement in politics. Decentralization may likewise strengthen efforts to institute democracy at the national level.

In other areas decentralization has more modest promise. For example, development programs undertaken as part of decentralization are observed to be more responsive to local needs but often limited to small infrastructure projects. Shifts of powers to lower levels are similarly acknowledged to reinforce central government commitment to rural development but not without some resistance from higher authorities. While decentralization reform may empower local communities to resist unwanted western influences, it may likewise further the expansion of modern beliefs and practices. Decentralization too may do little to enhance the interests of ethnic and religious minorities and women. Importantly, decentralization provides opportunities for creative cooperation between NGOs and local government but only after deeply held suspicions are overcome. Moreover, the literature provides no clear correlation between decentralization reform and reduced corruption.

Taking a realistic view, the CCSP review likewise identifies areas where decentralization holds limited promise. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the literature indicates that decentralization has had little positive impact on poverty alleviation. The reason for this is that local elites tend to dominate the local political system and to capture the benefits derived from it. This has immediate relevance for Cambodia, as one of the objectives of the government's decentralization reform is poverty reduction. Moreover, decentralization has had little success in promoting community participation in development. This usually results from the supra local or larger than village character of the decentralized institutions, suspicions about government initiatives, electoral competition within villages, or inequalities within villages. In addition, decentralization has been found to offer little promise in reducing overall government expenditure, mobilizing local resources, and performing tasks off-loaded by the central government.

In August 2002 Padrigu Consultants conducted a literature review on decentralization issues in preparing a research framework for the Cambodia Development Resource Institute's (CDRI) Policy Orientated Research Program on Decentralization.³ Key findings of this report likewise provide a useful reference point for the research questions raised in this study.

The Padrigu review once again emphasizes that decentralization in itself does not necessarily lead to local democracy and poverty reduction. The content of politics will not change, good governance will not emerge, and poverty will not be alleviated automatically as a result of decentralization. Central political will to pursue and monitor the reform is critical as well as institutional capacity at the local level to perform properly. These insights are pertinent to Cambodia for local democracy and poverty alleviation are stated objectives of the reform.

³ Joakim Ojendal, Robin Biddulph, Pia Wallgren, and Kim Sedara, *Understanding Decentralisation in Cambodia: A Research Framework to Support the Processes of Devolution and Deconcentration in Cambodia*, (Goteborg/Phnom Penh: Padrigu Consultants, August 2002).

The Padrigu review cites studies in other Asia countries that raise concern about the independence and integrity of decentralized institutions like Commune Councils in relation to higher levels of government and vested political party interests. Several questions arise. Will relatively uneducated commune councilors be able to perform their jobs efficiently? Will commune councilors receive the proper support from higher levels to assure this? Will local elites under prevailing patronage systems dominate local governance? Will civil society under such conditions be able to assert itself in relation to the local state? The literature shows that decentralization reform works best when a strong civil society demands good governance and accountability from local government.

Research Methods

This study was undertaken as a special research activity offered to past participants of the ADI training course. A primary objective of the activity was to build the capacity of the former trainees in qualitative research. In all, 21 NGO managers (10 men and 11 women) from 15 organizations participated (see Appendix 6). An introductory workshop convened from 12 to 15 August 2003 in Phnom Penh discussed types of qualitative research, building the conceptual framework and research design, data collection methods, and recording, managing and analyzing data. During the workshop the research objectives and key questions of the study were refined and guide questionnaires for focus group discussions and individual interviews were developed. In preparation for the fieldwork the participants were divided into four research teams each headed by one ADI staff member.

The field research focused on five communes receiving strong support from external agencies. From 20 to 21 August 2003 the five-member ADI team conducted a pretest in Krang Leav commune in Bati district of Takeo province. This commune received support from World Vision Cambodia. From 1 to 6 September 2003 two of the four participant research teams conducted fieldwork in Kampot province. One team studied Champey commune in Angkor Chey district, which received support from GTZ, while the other studied Chres commune in Chumkiri district, which received support from CIDSE. From 8 to 13 September 2003 the two remaining participant research teams conducted fieldwork in Pursat province. One team researched Phteas Rung commune in Kravanh district, which received support from PLG, while the other researched Metoek commune in Bakan district, which received support from Concern Worldwide. Fieldwork activities in all five locations included focus group and individual interviews with commune councilors, focus group interviews with civil society leaders, informal focus group interviews with commune residents, interviews with district government officials, interviews with Seila District Facilitation Teams, and interviews with respective support agency staff from World Vision, GTZ, CIDSE, PLG, or Concern.

A concluding workshop with all participants was held in Phnom Penh from 21 to 24 October 2003. At this time the research teams coded and analyzed the qualitative data from each of their respective commune case studies. The teams likewise developed drafts of the case studies and presented these for comment in plenary sessions. A comparative analysis of the findings and analysis of the five commune experiences was initiated before the close of the workshop. The ADI team subsequently developed the various field study interviews and case study write-ups and analyses into this final report.

Scope and Limitations

With 1,621 commune councils established in Cambodia, this study of Commune Council experiences in five communes can hardly be considered comprehensive, exhaustive or

definitive. Indeed the research undertaken never had this intent. Rather the study seeks to generate discussion and debate on processes within the decentralization reform program based on in-depth, albeit limited, field research conducted nearly two years after the Commune Council elections. In this respect, it is imperative for the readers of this report to consult the valuable work on decentralization reform that has been undertaken by several other recent studies.⁴ By viewing the findings of this inquiry comparatively with other empirical research, it is hoped that issues in the Cambodian decentralization process will become clearer and subject to action by a wide range of stakeholders.

⁴ See for instance, Caroline Rusten, Kim Sedara, Eng Netra, and Pak Kimchoeun, *The Challenges of the Decentralisation Design in Cambodia*, (Phnom Penh: Cambodia Development Resource Institute, 2004); Christina Mansfield and Kurt MacLeod, *Commune Councils & Civil Society: Promoting Decentralization Through Partnerships*, (Phnom Penh: PACT, January 2004); and Robin Biddulph, *PAT Empowerment Study – Final Report*, (Phnom Penh: DFID/Sida & UNDP, November 2003).

Findings and Analysis

Commune Administration

Change and continuity

In all five communes studied there was widely accepted agreement that changes had taken place in commune administration since the Commune Council election of February 2002. These changes related mainly to the composition and practice of the commune officials. Before the formation of the Commune Councils, appointed commune chiefs administered the communes as representatives of the majority political party. Now elected Commune Councils, comprised of from five to 11 members and often representing more than one political party, governed the communes. Previously, the commune chiefs convened few meetings and made decisions based largely on their own discretions or on directives from the central government. Now the Commune Councils held meetings regularly and made decisions after consultation with one another. Formerly, commune officials simply passed on legislation decreed from national policy makers. Now Commune Councils issued their own commune orders or *deika*, some addressed to the solution of community problems. Before the roles and responsibilities of the commune authorities were vague. Now the roles and responsibilities of the commune councilors were clearly defined and separate tasks were delineated for individual members. Before little thought was given to building the capacity of commune officials. Now commune councilors received training to perform their work satisfactorily. Before commune authorities had limited contacts with village associations and NGOs. Now Commune Councils worked more closely with these groups.

Despite these advances, the changes taking place in commune administration were not all pervasive. Commune councilors still relied heavily on instructions from upper levels of government to know what they should do and commune chiefs still exercised considerable influence over collective decision-making. Often councilors from minority parties were unable to voice their views sufficiently and decisions made by the councils conformed to the positions of the majority party. Most commune chiefs had served previously in the same capacity and had not fully overcome their authoritarian style. Women participation as council members was practically nonexistent.⁵ Generally, the Commune Councils lacked a sense of accountability to their constituents and rarely met or consulted with them. While councilors had the right to issue commune orders, they did not always have the commensurate authority to enforce them. Many councilors had limited formal education and declared that they still needed more training to perform their roles adequately. In large measure relationships with village associations and NGOs were dictated by legal requirements rather than inspired by creative opportunities.

Perceptions of performance likewise varied greatly among the types of respondents interviewed. In general, the Commune Councils researched felt that they had done a good job since taking office. Representatives of civil society associations, while somewhat more guarded in their assessments, were likewise enthusiastic about the progress to date. By comparison, ordinary villagers were, on the whole, not satisfied with the work of the Commune Councils. From the viewpoint of the villagers, the commune councilors were

⁵ Only one (2.5%) of the 40 councilors in the five communes studied was a woman. Nationwide 983 (8.7%) of the total 11,261 councilors in 1,621 communes were women (see Mansfield and MacLeod, *Commune Council & Civil Society*, 5-6). Rusten et al, *The Challenges of the Decentralization Design in Cambodia*, observe that where women participate as councilors, their access to decision-making is very limited.

rather distant political figures that did not involve them in their work or report to them on a regular basis.

Comparative features of change

While the observations above characterized common aspects of the change experienced, distinguishing features emerged from each of the five communes studied.

In Krang Leav commune (Takeo) the chief elected to the Commune Council was also the commune head in the previous administration. A dynamic leader, the commune chief was able to take advantage of the decentralization process to enhance his power and mobilize support from external development agencies. In Krang Leav the Commune Council held regular monthly meetings as mandated by law and worked hard to achieve consensus and resolve issues quickly. With all but one of the nine councilors aligned with the Cambodia People's Party (CPP), inter party rivalry was minimal. Direct links with CPP Ministers of Parliament in Phnom Penh also facilitated support. However, gender equality on the all male council was absent. Civil society representatives indicated that the commune authorities were now more active than before and able to provide leadership to more people in the commune's 23 villages. While ordinary people were not involved or informed about local governance issues, the practice of the commune chief and other councilors to attend weddings and funerals in the villages earned them the respect of their constituents. This combination of hard work, strong party ties, and traditional rapport with villagers enabled the Krang Leav Commune Council to achieve early gains towards more efficient and effective commune administration.

In Champey commune (Kampot) the elected chief of the Commune Council had likewise served previously as the commune head under the CPP. This council was composed of four CPP members, one Funcinpec party member, and one Sam Rainsy party member. All the councilors were men. Despite political differences, the councilors were able to rise above their party affiliations and work together. A major achievement was the council's passage of commune orders related to community security and resource management. The council's ability to communicate with villagers and to keep them informed of what they were doing was less effective. This was partly due to a lack of awareness about the need for increased transparency and openness. It was also partly due to their practice of working through village chiefs and village development committees (VDCs). The Commune Council needed to build understanding and capacity to improve its performance and to communicate more directly with constituents in the 11 commune villages.

In Chres commune (Kampot) the Commune Council was likewise composed of representatives from different political parties: three from the CPP, one from Funcinpec, and one from Sam Rainsy. However, a new commune chief from the CPP had been elected to replace the former chief who, although remaining on the council, had lost favor with many Chres residents. All five councilors were men. The Chres Commune Council convened regular meetings, which enabled them to build good relations among themselves and address administrative issues expediently. However, the council did not involve village stakeholders in discussions about local governance, report to them about their work, or publicize circulars from higher levels of government. By and large, the Commune Council acted as the commune authorities had in the past performing critical though conventional functions such as mediating disputes and maintaining security in the four commune villages. Similarly, the council held themselves more accountable to centralized leadership than to village constituents. While the electoral process had opened up opportunities for multiparty governance, the administrative practice of the Chres Commune Council reflected a propensity towards continuity rather than towards change.

In Pteas Rung commune (Pursat) the Commune Council was similarly composed of representatives of various political parties: eight from the CPP, two from Funcinpec, and one from the Sam Rainsy party. The commune chief was a CPP member and all but one of the councilors were men. Working through party differences, the council learned to negotiate positions with each another and arrive at decisions collectively. While the commune chief exercised considerable influence, the needs of his village did not take preference over the needs of other villages. The Commune Council channeled information and statements through the village chiefs and the VDCs but these reports did not always reach villagers of all social strata. As a consequence many villagers remained ignorant of the decisions made by the council. Ironically, village chiefs and police appointed during the past administration were generally more accessible to people than the elected commune officials. While the Pteas Rung Commune Council had overcome many of the limitations of the former commune authorities, it had yet to establish strong relationships with residents in the 13 commune villages.

In Metoek commune (Pursat) the Commune Council was multiparty composed of six representatives from CPP, two from Funcinpec, and one from Sam Rainsy. The commune chief was a CPP member and all the councilors were men. The election of the Commune Council had resulted in a higher number of commune officials and a greater delegation of power. Roles and responsibilities were likewise more clearly defined and meetings were conducted regularly. As an outcome of these changes, work was accomplished more expeditiously and information shared more quickly than in the previous administration. Despite these gains, partisan affiliations undermined the overall effectiveness of the council as members held themselves more accountable to the interests of their political parties than to the concerns of local government. Of note, the Commune Council had passed orders prohibiting electrofishing and gambling in the commune but found it difficult to enforce these bans without support from higher officials. Lack of formal education made it difficult for the councilors to meet all the demands of their jobs, although they had received numerous trainings from NGOs and the government Seila program. Since the councilors seldom visited the 15 commune villages and reported infrequently through village chiefs and VDCs, they had not established strong rapport with their constituents.

Planning and Implementing Activities

Involvement in local development

As part of the decentralization reform, Commune Councils were constituted to participate in local development. The establishment of the commune as the lowest level of development planning and implementation marked a critical shift away from centralized government control and promised to have far-reaching consequences especially for those involved in rural development. Drawing on the experience of the five-year (1996-2001) UNDP/CARERE experiment with the government Seila program, laws were passed and systems and procedures were put in place to facilitate the Commune Councils' involvement in local development. As designed, the process included the development and consolidation of 5-year plans undertaken with the participation of villagers.⁶ It likewise entailed the formation of Planning and Budgeting Committees and Procurement Committees composed of local authorities and civil society representatives to assist and advise the commune councilors. Importantly, the reform made provision for commune funds to be allocated each year to

⁶ Biddulph, *PAT Empowerment Study* discusses participation issues at length. This study carried out in 20 communes and 4 *sangkats* states that 50% of villagers interviewed with positions of responsibility in the community and 49% of villagers randomly selected reported that they had been involved in the project selection process.

finance projects prioritized in the plans.⁷ Guidelines were passed on how to conduct contract bidding.⁸ District Integration Workshops were scheduled annually to coordinate commune planning with district and provincial planning and to generate additional funding from external agencies. District Facilitation Teams were established within the Seila program to support the work of the commune councilors and to ensure that tasks were completed to standard.

Overall, the five Commune Councils studied made considerable progress in fulfilling the tasks designed into the local planning and implementation process. At the time of the research, all five Commune Councils had established Planning and Budgeting Committees, conducted planning sessions in villages, and produced 5-year plans. The councils had likewise authorized funds and hired contractors through bids to implement infrastructure projects such as village roads, schools, and culverts with counterpart contributions from villagers. These projects had benefited poor as well as better-off households. The councilors too had presented their plans at District Integration Workshops and obtained additional funding for projects from external development agencies. Considering the length of time the councilors were in office and the limitations of their formal education, these accomplishments were truly noteworthy. For sure, a large part of their success was due to the fact that they had received strong support from government and development agencies.

Despite the early achievements made by the five commune councils in local planning and implementation, the process was far from smooth or faultless. Participation of villagers in planning sessions was uneven and sometimes amounted to no more than observation.⁹ The purpose of meetings convened with villagers was often obscure. Selection of projects implemented was driven by a higher-level predisposition for infrastructure development, which did not necessarily address basic needs. Local contributions from villagers were not always forthcoming. The procedures for authorizing expenditures and hiring contractors were not universally understood. Releases of funds from the national treasury were occasionally late and, at times, less than expected.¹⁰ Infrastructure projects were not always constructed to standard. Expenditures for development projects were not normally made public. Project benefits, while distributed rather broadly and avoiding elite capture, were not that substantial. Reliance on District Facilitation Teams and development agencies to accomplish tasks was sometimes excessive. Perhaps understandably, although of some concern, the process was driven by blueprints and requirements imposed from the top rather than by learning emerging from the bottom.

Comparative experiences in local development

While the findings above highlighted overall trends, details of individual experiences were likewise instructive.

⁷ According to Rusten et al, *Challenges of the Decentralization Design in Cambodia* communes were slated to receive on average some \$5,000 for development and \$3,000 for administration in 2003. Biddulph, *PAT Empowerment Study* mentions that 38% of villagers interviewed with positions of responsibility in the community and 17% of villagers randomly selected knew that the council had development funds that it could decide over.

⁸ See Mansfield and MacLeod, *Commune Council & Civil Society*, 7-8 for a description of the steps in the bidding process.

⁹ See Rusten et al's discussion of the Khmer term "chol rourm" (participation) in Chapter Seven of *The Challenges of the Decentralization Design in Cambodia*.

¹⁰ According to the Seila/PLG Mid-Term 2003 only 50 per cent of the administrative funds and 40 per cent of the development funds had been released nationwide to the provincial treasury for the communes by the end of October 2003 (cited in Rusten et al, *The Challenges of the Decentralization Design in Cambodia*).

In Krang Leav commune (Takeo) needs assessments were undertaken in each of the 23 villages and then consolidated into the 5-year plan with support from the Seila District Facilitation Team. The Commune Council relied primarily on the village chiefs and VDCs to conduct the assessments in their capacity as members of the Planning and Budgeting Committee, which also included the councilors. By all accounts the planning sessions were well attended, although there was confusion on the part of villagers about the various meetings they had attended. Some meetings were convened on behalf of the Commune Council and others on behalf of NGOs. Similarly, some villagers participated in the needs assessments and others attended meetings during the presentation of the consolidated 5-year plan. The Commune Council constructed four schools with their commune funds although they encountered some difficulties in collecting local contributions. Of note, the Commune Council was able to undertake other major infrastructure projects within its 5-year plan through funds and support received from World Vision Cambodia and Spean Kampuchea-Holland.

In Champey commune (Kampot) the Planning and Budgeting Committee assessed and prioritized needs in all eight villages. The committee was composed of Commune Council members, the village chiefs, and civil society representatives like VDCs. While civil society groups participated actively in the planning process, ordinary villagers often remained at the periphery without fully understanding what was taking place. The 5-year plan developed by the councilors and committee members with support from the District Facilitation Team and GTZ reflected the limitations of the commune fund. The Commune Council constructed roads and culverts with money received through the government, and GTZ and other agencies provided funds for improving agriculture, animal health, village health care, and other projects. The council faced some problems with raising local contributions and dealing with households whose property was affected by the road construction. This notwithstanding, civil society representatives explained proudly how local resource sharing had built ownership of the projects. At the same time, these same respondents maintained that improved financial management and transparency would benefit project implementation.

In Chres commune (Kampot) the Planning and Budgeting Committee, composed of all five Commune Councilors, four village chiefs, four VDC members, and two village representatives, developed the 5-year plan with support from the District Facilitation Team, CIDSE and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The village chiefs and VDCs were primarily responsible for identifying and prioritizing needs in the four commune villages. The Commune Council built infrastructure projects (school, road, watergate) with commune funds although implementation of planned activities was impeded by villagers' reluctance to contribute labor and cash. This was due, in part, to the identification of commune councilors with political parties. Civil society members of the Planning and Budgeting Committee likewise complained that they lacked full knowledge of commune development expenditures and that some structures built did not meet technical standards. Despite these drawbacks, support from CIDSE and FAO for additional project activities meant that Chres commune received considerable development benefits.

In Pteas Rung commune (Pursat) the Planning and Budgeting Committee, composed of the commune chief and the village chiefs, helped to mobilize people's participation in the planning process. Needs assessments were conducted in all 13 villages with support from the District Facilitation Team. Priorities covered a wide range of activities, although the council decided to fund mainly infrastructure projects such as wells, roads, school, and drainage pipes. VDCs were called upon to disseminate the finalized plan to villagers and to help raise local contributions. By and large, civil society associations were not actively involved in the process. The District Facilitation Team helped to manage the bidding process with

contractors and to ensure that technical specifications of projects were met. Budget allocations were not strictly followed and funds were often shifted from one project to another. Projects in the plan financed by the World Food Programme (WFP), Concern Worldwide, and other development organizations were implemented and monitored directly by these groups.

In Metoek commune (Pursat) village chiefs, VDCs, and Concern Worldwide staff undertook primary responsibility for conducted needs assessments in the 15 villages. The Planning and Budgeting Committee, comprised of the nine Commune Council members plus two VDC members from each of the 15 villages, then consolidated the village plans into the 5-year commune plan with support from Concern and the District Facilitation Team. The Commune Council funded infrastructure projects such as roads and irrigation canals, but found it difficult to mobilize counterpart contributions due to severe food shortages suffered by villagers. Concern funded a substantial portion of the commune plan although focused this support on the five villages within its own catchment area. While this allowed Concern to retain management and monitoring control of the projects it funded, it skewed the direction of local development and revealed the challenges that confronted even a forward-thinking NGO in dealing with the practical implications of local governance.

Partnerships Between Commune Councils and Civil Society

Building partnerships

Before the February 2002 Commune Council election NGOs had expressed serious misgivings and suspicious about decentralization in Cambodia. While much of the critique centered on the election law, which adopted proportional representation and the use of party lists, serious questions were raised about the underlying intent of the decentralization reform and its potential to undermine or co-opt NGO development programs for political ends. Given these initial apprehensions the level of cooperation documented between NGOs and Commune Councils in the five communes studied was truly remarkable. NGOs provided training support to commune councilors, assisted in planning sessions, and even demonstrated their willingness to fund projects in the 5-year commune plans. Similarly, VDCs and village association leaders, as members of Planning and Budgeting Committees, worked closely with the Commune Councils to conduct village needs assessments and to consolidate 5-year plans. Members of village associations participated actively in the planning sessions and contributed counterpart funds for the implementation of commune projects.

Highlighting the theme of partnership in decentralization, NGOs convened a Partnership Workshop from 27-29 January 2003 with representatives of Commune Councils and civil society from 11 communes. In that workshop partnership was defined as “a mutually beneficial relationship between two or more parties established in order to realize common and individual goals.” Basic qualities of successful partnerships were identified as mutual respect, common goals, commitment, and meaningful dialogue.¹¹ A recent PACT publication on Commune Councils and civil society defines partnership as “a relationship between a commune council and its members and one or more other parties established in order to realize stated common goals.”¹² While Commune Councils and civil society groups had accomplished much together in the five communes researched, it would be facile for us to report that real partnerships had indeed emerged. More time needed to elapse and more effort

¹¹ See Shelley Flam, *Perspectives for Partnership: Workshop Handbook*, (Phnom Penh: CIDSE Cambodia, January 2003).

¹² Mansfield and MacLeod, *Commune Councils & Civil Society*, 4.

needed to be made before existing relationships developed into full partnerships. Nevertheless, coordination and cooperation had improved and Commune Councils and civil society groups had worked closely together to develop and implement commune plans.

Comparative experiences in building partnerships

While collaborative relationships between Commune Councils and civil society were evident in all five communes, individual circumstances varied.

In Krang Leav commune (Takeo) the Commune Council successfully involved NGOs and development agencies in funding projects in the 5-year commune plan. This helped to broaden the development agenda of the Commune Council and, at the same time, move organizations away from developing strictly parallel programs. With several outside agencies operating within the commune, the level of development assistance was considerable. The Commune Council relied heavily on VDCs to conduct needs assessments and mobilize local contributions. Established under Seila and less responsible for NGO supported activities, the VDCs readily made themselves available to support the work of the Commune Council. By comparison, the council did not actively involve village associations in collaborative work.

In Champey commune (Kampot) the Commune Council received substantial training and funding support from GTZ, a bilateral development agency. The few NGOs that worked in the commune collaborated closely with the Commune Council but on a smaller scale. The fact that GTZ (as well as PLG) worked through government staff meant that the Commune Council had numerous contacts with state representatives but less exposure to NGOs. At the local level, VDCs and village associations participated in needs assessments and contributed to the implementation of projects such as road construction. Of note, village groups such as the rice banks, credit, and tables for hire that were formed by GTZ looked to the Commune Council to provide direction and to audit financial accounts. This indicated a blurring of relations between civil society and the local state.

In Chres commune (Kampot) the Commune Council launched its development activities amid the large CIDSE community development program, which had been operational for eight years. Taking steps to work together, the council and CIDSE had coordinated village development planning, and CIDSE had provided funds for projects in the 5-year plan that were consistent with its own objectives. At the same time, CIDSE's development activities in the commune were much more comprehensive than those prioritized in the commune plan and in a very real sense comprised a parallel program to that of the Commune Council. This presented a real challenge to the emerging partnership. The Commune Council needed to demonstrate that it was capable of managing a larger program with financial integrity, while CIDSE needed to incorporate more of its own activities into the 5-year plan. Moreover, as CIDSE supported the capacity building of the Commune Council in local development, it needed to strengthen the voice of civil society associations in relation to the local state. CIDSE's formation of the VDC association at the commune level was a critical step in this direction. The Chres Commune Council on its part needed to take the VDCs and village associations more seriously.

In Pteas Rung commune (Pursat) the Commune Council encouraged NGOs to coordinate efforts to avoid duplication and to fund projects identified in the 5-year plan. While coordination had improved and NGOs had agreed to fund some activities in the 5-year plan, project financing, implementation, and monitoring were done separately by the Commune Council and NGOs. Meanwhile, the Commune Council had a strong relationship with the government Seila program which received support from PLG. Seila had earlier formed the VDCs and contributed sizeable resources to the commune through the local development

fund. As a government program Seila was not well positioned to promote Commune Council relations with NGOs or village associations. The Commune Council worked primarily through village chiefs and did not nurture relationships with village groups.

In Metoek commune (Pursat) the Commune Council developed a strategic alliance with Concern Worldwide. Much to its credit Concern designed a clear operational strategy for supporting the work of Commune Councils in local development within the framework of the Seila program. This involved the identification of poor communes, training in decentralization and local governance reform, analysis of community situations, assistance in developing the 5-year plan, provision of funds and fund raising support, and assistance in managing the project development cycle.¹³ In Metoek the Commune Council benefited much from Concern's dedicated support in the development process. Still the councilors' allegiance to political party interests and Concern's adherence to its development agenda and financial requirements made the relationship difficult at times. Although the Commune Council relied on VDCs to carry out tasks related to development planning and implementation, it did not interact with them or with village associations on a regular basis.

Relationships with National Government and Political Parties

Dealing with higher authorities

To ensure the success of the decentralization reform, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) exerted a huge effort to pass legislation and to provide systems and procedures for supporting the work of the Commune Councils. In large measure these were effective.¹⁴ The work of the Seila District Facilitation Teams was especially noteworthy. In all five communes studied the District Facilitation Teams had provided important assistance to the Commune Councils in local development. This included support to management trainings, facilitation of village needs assessments, writing the 5-year plans, preparing for District Integration Workshops, conducting bidding processes, and monitoring project implementation. Indeed the work accomplished by the District Facilitation Teams might have been too much rather than too little, unwittingly restricting opportunities for learning.¹⁵ With more authority and funds devolved to the Commune Councils and with support coming primarily from the Seila program, commune reliance on district governments was lessened. At the same time, limitations of commune funds and constraints placed on the taxation powers of Commune Councils meant that they were still largely dependent on the national government.

Meanwhile, the adoption of proportional representation and party lists in the electoral process practically ensured that political parties would play a major role in determining how the decentralization reform unfolded. In the five communes studied a majority of the commune councilors and all the commune chiefs were CPP members reminiscent of past administrations. Similarly, in villages throughout the five communes signboards of the CPP, Funcinpec, and Sam Rainsy parties visibly proclaimed the presence of party interests in local

¹³ See "NGO Pathways to Decentralization: The Experience of Concern Worldwide," *Commune Council Support Project Bulletin*, July 2003, Issue No. 14.

¹⁴ Robert B. Oberndorf, *Law Harmonization in Relation to Decentralization*, Presentation at the Dissemination Seminar on The Challenges of the Decentralization Design in Cambodia, Organized by the Cambodia Development Resource Institute, Phnom Penh, January 2004.

¹⁵ Rusten et al, *Challenges of the Decentralization Design in Cambodia* argue that a weakness of the District Facilitation Team's capacity support lies in its limited space for local initiative. They propose that the "time might have come, at least in the old Seila provinces, to redesign the capacity support and focus on horizontal rather than vertical learning, as well as to give space for new initiatives for service delivery to flourish." Mansfield and MacLeod, *Commune Council & Civil Society*, 29, 30 & 33 likewise promote increased inter-commune interaction.

life. To a large extent the intrusion of party struggles at the local level intensified conflicts and divisions unnecessarily, undermining efforts to promote local collaboration and solidarity. The fact that commune councilors were elected as representatives of political parties likewise meant that they were more accountable to party interests than to their constituents. This noted, a majority of the Commune Councils studied was able to negotiate party differences and work for the good of their communes. In other cases party loyalties had clearly undermined the effectiveness of the Commune Councils.¹⁶

Comparative experiences in dealing with higher authorities

As in other areas of investigation, Commune Council relationships with higher government authorities and political parties differed.

In Krang Leav commune (Takeo) the Commune Council diligently followed the guidelines set down by the Ministry of Interior. These included providing regular reports to district and provincial authorities. The commune chief possessed good communication skills and was able to take advantage of the District Integration Workshops to generate assistance from government line agencies and external development organizations. The predominantly CPP council also had strong ties with Ministers of Parliament in Phnom Penh who were able to provide direct support.

In Champey commune (Kampot) the Commune Council submitted regular reports to district officials and the commune chief attended district meetings. The council had good relationships with government line agencies in health and agriculture, which supported development efforts in the commune. The council likewise desired to establish personal relationships with high-ranking government officials to secure support for large infrastructure projects such as roads, schools, and health centers. The multiparty council was largely able surmount party differences and find common ground to work together.

In Chres commune (Kampot) the Commune Council received strong support from the district government. District officials convened meetings between Seila staff and commune councilors to resolve difficulties that arose in project implementation. They likewise took an active role in monitoring commune infrastructure projects. Partisan politics led to competition in project implementation, which in turn adversely affected villagers' participation. Commune councilors often used their positions to win people's loyalty and support for their own parties.

In Pteas Rung commune (Pursat) the Commune Council benefited from the strong support of the Seila program which had provided development assistance to the commune since 1996. Seila had helped to build the capacity of the Commune Council members and to assist them in the tasks related to development planning and implementation. By all accounts, the multiparty Commune Council had tried to rise above party differences to serve the interests of its constituents. In large measure it was successful, although party struggles and resentments still persisted.

In Metoek commune (Pursat) the Commune Council reported regularly to the district governor and department heads of government line agencies. The council also coordinated closely with the Seila program. Still, party loyalties impeded the overall performance of the

¹⁶ Caroline Hughes reports that decentralization contributed to an improvement of inter-party relations at the local level in the 2003 election when compared to relations in the 1998 election. However, she cautions that even in 2003 a strong sense of political community and cooperation was lacking between local party representatives. See Hughes, "Evolution of Conflict Management During Election Periods," *Cambodia Development Review*, January-March 2004.

multiparty Commune Council. Unable to transcend party affiliations and conduct its work effectively, the Council Commune squandered the support of its constituency and left them disillusioned.

Conclusions

Learning from Commune Council Experiences

Examining the experience of the five Commune Councils studied at this early stage of the decentralization reform offered much enthusiasm for broad based support of the program. While progress to date had been uneven and less than inclusive, much had been achieved in a relatively short period of time. Commune Councils had extended participation in commune administration to multiparty representatives and had taken responsibility for the decisions they made. Councils had also issued commune orders addressing critical commune problems. Generally, the councils had a longer reach and were more responsive to issues presented to them due to their increased numbers. This was particular true in the area of dispute resolution and less so the area of providing public services.¹⁷ The councils had likewise begun to channel information through VDCs and not only through village chiefs as in the past. Nonetheless, the councils had largely failed to establish rapport with ordinary villagers and to involve them in the decentralization process.

With respect to local development, the five Commune Councils researched had completed the mechanics of the tasks required of them. All had completed 5-year plans and all had implemented small infrastructure projects. Along the way, local authorities and civil society leaders were actively involved in the process and ordinary villagers less so. Overall the immersion of the Commune Councils in local planning and project implementation proved to be a valuable learning experience. In years to come the procedures followed would need to be further refined allowing for greater local initiative and leading to increased local participation and ownership. To be effective in the long-term, Commune Councils would need to execute their right to raise funds through taxation and to capture larger shares of the national budget and development agency allocations. Similarly, councils would need to move beyond the provision of small infrastructure projects to address pressing community issues such as severe food shortages, endemic labor migration, HIV/AIDS, and rural unemployment. Of necessity, this would entail advocacy with higher levels of government and a much stronger voice in national policy issues.

Since the early 1990s the government permitted NGOs to work directly in local communities. In this regard, NGOs signed Memorandums of Agreements with appropriate Ministries, submitted reports to provincial officials, and attended meetings at provincial levels if asked to do so. NGO likewise informed local authorities about the general nature of their work. While NGOs respected the office of the commune and village chiefs, they were conscious of the fact that local authorities were appointed representatives of the majority party and therefore chose not to channel resources through them. As a result, NGO development programs evolved as parallel efforts to those of the state. The formation of the Commune Councils as democratically elected bodies mandated to plan and implement local development thus posed a formidable challenge to NGOs. Overall, NGOs working in the five communes studied had shown themselves responsive to the possibilities of close collaboration with Commune Councils. Support to planning processes was easily forthcoming. But doubts remained about commune councilor capacity and the proper accounting of funds. When NGOs financed projects in the commune 5-year plans, they insisted on retaining managerial and monitoring control. Clearly, NGOs were well placed and well equipped to enable the work of the Commune Councils. Still, given the size of their

¹⁷ See Mansfield and MacLeod, *Commune Council & Civil Society*, 13-14, 19-21 for a discussion of Commune Council involvement in mediation and public services.

parallel programs, their suspicions about working with government, and their prevailing practice of working independently, NGOs had the potential of disabling the work of Commune Councils as well.

An important outcome of NGO work in local communities was the formation of civil society committees and associations such as VDCs, rice banks, animal banks, cash credit and women's organizations, which complemented traditional self-help and pagoda groups. In the five communes studied representatives from these groups were called upon to participate in the Planning and Budgeting Committees. Similarly, members of these groups were more actively involved in the commune planning and implementation process than other villagers. Importantly, the civil society groups at the local level raised questions about the practices of the Commune Councils related to the dissemination of information and the transparency of expenditures. Among constituents, these associations had the most potential for holding the Commune Councils accountable for their actions. On a note of caution, the commitment of civil society groups to work with the Commune Councils had at times underplayed the watchdog role of local associations in the emerging partnerships. VDCs in particular often served as functionaries of the Commune Councils without questioning the probity of council practice.

On their part, the Commune Councils were eager to avail of the assistance offered by civil society leaders in conducting needs assessments and mobilizing counterpart contributions. However, they normally related to these people as their agents in the villages much like they related to village chiefs. Generally, the Commune Councils did not have a clear understanding or appreciation of the complementary relationship between civil society and the local state. In communes where NGOs were less active this problem was more pronounced and lines between civil society and the local state were often indistinct.

The RGC deserved much credit for its efforts in support of the decentralization reform. The contributions of the Seila program likewise deserved recognition. The involvement of the political parties had been more problematic. While some Commune Councils had been able to work through party differences, others had not. Upward accountability to parties and the pervasive lack of general accountability to constituents presented a formidable obstacle to the reform process. Decentralization entails effective central-local relations and in the political culture of Cambodia this necessarily involves the participation of political parties. Nevertheless, experiences from the world over emphasize that where general accountability is lacking, decentralization inevitably fails.¹⁸ For that reason, the Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI) comprehensive study on the decentralization design in Cambodia advocates that the Election Law and the Law on Administration and Management of the Communes and *Sangkats* be amended to help ensure that councilors are accountable to the electorate rather than to the party.¹⁹

Contributions to Poverty Reduction and Local Democracy

As underscored in the literature review of this study decentralization reform does not necessarily lead to poverty reduction or local democracy. Still these aims constitute goals of the Cambodia decentralization program and progress towards these goals must be assessed. With respect to poverty reduction development assistance provided to the five communes studied was relatively high as NGOs and other development agencies supplied technical support and material aid over and above the commune funds. Considered separately the commune funds received from the government in 2002 and 2003 as part of the

¹⁸ J. Manor, *Local Governance*, Paper presented at a SIDA seminar on Good Governance. Stockholm. September 2003 cited in Rusten et al, *The Challenges of the Decentralization Design in Cambodia*.

¹⁹ See Policy Options in Rusten et al, *The Challenges of the Decentralization Design in Cambodia*.

decentralization program were rather meager. This observation is not meant to belittle the real benefits derived from the projects financed with commune funds, only to point out that their contribution to poverty reduction was extremely limited. But this need not be the case. In three communes studied (Champey, Chres and Phteas Rung) large-scale capital investment in irrigation systems had potential to transform rural livelihoods and alleviate poverty. By contrast, in another commune studied (Metoek) development assistance from multiple sources had been unable to offset the deleterious effects of successive droughts and floods and poverty reduction options were more complex. These observations suggested alternative and diverse strategies of poverty reduction under decentralization. On the one hand, there was a need to create the conditions (local capacity and external support) that enabled the planning process to fully develop its potential.²⁰ On the other, there was a need to institutionalize central-local dialogue on national poverty issues that produced coordinated solutions to multi-levelled problems.

With regard to the promotion of local democracy decentralization reform had achieved notable gains. Importantly, the Commune Election of February 2002 had enabled Cambodian citizens to vote for local officials for the first time in decades. In four of the five communes studied the Commune Council included representatives from three political parties and in the other, representatives from two political parties. While inter-party rivalry was still high, regular meetings and the discussion of issues had created space for an exchange of ideas and negotiated decision-making. Meanwhile, the requirements of the participatory planning process necessitated that councilors solicit the views and cooperation of civil society representatives and ordinary villagers. In this respect the promotion of local democracy and poverty reduction were linked. In Cambodia poverty alleviation requires societal reconstruction in the broad sense of overcoming fear, distrust, violence, illiteracy, and apathy, as an integral part of improving material circumstances.²¹ Whether the prevailing political culture in Cambodia would allow for the societal change envisaged or opt for a further entrenchment of existing conditions remained to be seen. To be sure enthusiasm for the prospects of local democracy in Cambodia required a long-term view.²² After the first two years of decentralization reform there was still much to be accomplished, but equally there was much to be excited about.

²⁰ See Rusten et al, *The Challenges of the Decentralization Design in Cambodia* for a discussion of this point.

²¹ Caroline Rusten and Joakim Ojendal, "Poverty Reduction through Decentralisation? Lessons from Elsewhere and Challenges for Cambodia," *Cambodia Development Review*, October-December 2003, 5.

²² David Ayers, Speech presented at the Annual General Meeting of the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia, December 2001.

Implications for NGOs

- **NGOs Need to Increase their Understanding of the Decentralization Process and its Consequences for their Programs.** With the democratic election of Commune Councils mandated to undertake local development, NGOs lose their justification for implementing parallel programs.
- **NGOs Need to Expand Participation in Civil Society Associations to Build Stronger Linkages between Commune Councils and their Constituencies.** Commune Councils have largely failed to establish rapport with ordinary villagers but realistically improved relations will only occur once these villagers have become members of civil society groups.
- **NGOs Need to Support Efforts of Local Associations to Hold Commune Councils Accountable for their Actions.** While local associations have actively participated in the local planning process, they need to mobilize themselves more effectively to hold Commune Councils accountable for their performances.
- **NGOs Need to Promote Learning among Commune Councils in their Area Programs.** NGOs are well placed to promote horizontal or inter-commune learning among Commune Councils, since their area programs normally cover more than one commune.
- **NGOs Need to Share Learning among Themselves.** NGOs are still learning how to interact effectively with Commune Councils, and the sharing of concrete experiences among organizations would be beneficial.
- **NGOs Need to Advocate for Election Reform to Ensure that Councilors are Accountable to the Electorate Rather than to the Party.** Current law reinforces upward accountability to parties rather than downward accountability to the electorate.
- **NGOs Need to Advocate for Commune Council Access to Increased Allotments of Commune Development Funds.** Commune Councils need to exercise their right to raise funds through taxation and to capture larger shares of the national budget and development agency allocations, for projects financed by commune funds to have an impact on poverty reduction.
- **NGOs Need to Advocate for Broad Societal Change Which Links Poverty Reduction to the Promotion of Local Democracy.** Poverty reduction in Cambodia requires societal reconstruction to broaden democratic space, and this in turn requires the political culture in Cambodia to move away from an entrenchment of existing conditions.

Appendix 1
CASE STUDY #1

Krang Leav Commune
Bati District
Takeo Province

Selected and Supported by
World Vision Cambodia

Background

Krang Leav was one of 15 communes in Bati district in Takeo province. The majority of households in Krang Leav's 23 villages were rice farmers, although small farm plots and poor soil made it one of the poorest communes in the district. Since 2003 a large reservoir had been under repair. Seven development agencies worked in the commune: World Vision Cambodia (WVC), Centre d'Etude et de Developpement Agricole (CEDAC), Reproductive and Child Health Alliance (RACHA), Rural Development and Rehabilitation Program (RDRP), Enfants et Developpement (E&D), Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirchen Schweiz (HEKS) and Spean Kampuchea-Holland.

In 2001 village development committees (VDCs) were established in the commune by the UNDP sponsored Seila program. The VDCs, comprised of five members including one women, coordinated community development activities with villagers. This work included collecting household data and prioritizing needs that were provided to the Seila program and to NGOs in support of village development projects.

World Vision started to work in 10 of the 23 villages of Kraing Leav commune in 2001, expanded to 13 villages in 2003, and planned to extend further to 15 villages in 2004. World Vision's program focused on four different areas: agriculture, primary health care provided through a health care center, primary and secondary schools, and capacity building in planning and budgeting processes.

The Commune Council, formed as a result of the February 2002 election, consisted of nine members. Eight of the commune councilors were members of the Cambodia People's Party (CPP) and one was a member of the Funcinpec party. All of the councilors were men. The Commune Council chief held the position of commune chief in the previous administration.

Commune Administration

Changes since the commune council formation

From the viewpoint of the Kraing Leav commune councilors the changes in commune administration since the formation of the council had been substantial. Prior to the election in February 2002 the commune chief and other commune authorities were appointed by the state and represented the interests of the majority CPP party. Relationships between the commune leaders and central level officials were characterized by a top-down approach. If problems occurred in the commune such as floods or fires, the commune authorities reported these to central levels and looked to the higher-level authorities to provide the solutions. On their part the higher-level officials made decisions and looked to the commune authorities and the village chiefs to implement them. Only two or three commune leaders participated in planning processes and no one gave comments on plans received from the top.

The Commune Council members declared that the approach now was more bottom-up. The councilors discussed issues together and decided what to do based on the needs of the people. Once decisions were made the commune councilors and village chiefs acted on them. In this way, the Commune Council argued that it was able to respond to more issues, more quickly because it did not have to pass through all levels of government. While the commune councilors had more work to do than those in the previous administration, the council had a larger team and was able to divide responsibilities among members. Overall, the Commune Council was satisfied with its work. The councilors were learning by doing and contented in the fulfillment of their tasks.

With respect to development planning, the Commune Council had conducted needs assessments and had prioritized the most important issues. The councilors said that most villagers had expressed satisfaction with their work because they had seen the results of their efforts. At the same time, some villagers were upset because road repair projects had affected their trees or their land.

Representatives of civil society groups interviewed at the commune center supported the generally positive view of the commune councilors with regard to the changes that had occurred. These leaders stated that previously the commune authorities were few and not very active. Decisions were based on personal biases and problems remained unsolved. As a result the commune had developed slowly. Since the formation of the Commune Council more people had been involved in commune leadership. The commune chief and Commune Council members were now very active. Decisions were based on the view of the majority and problems were addressed immediately. Since the commune chief had good relationships with external development agencies the Commune Council was able to raise funds to support development projects. As a consequence, the commune had developed more quickly.

Meetings

One of reasons for the progress achieved by the Commune Council in Kraing Leav was that it conducted regular monthly meetings with all Commune Council members in attendance. This had ensured that issues were addressed in a timely manner and that various views were discussed and exchanged. Ultimately, the commune chief resolved the differences and set forth the final decisions. Aside from the regular monthly meetings, the Commune Council organized informal meetings to solve specific problems. On these occasions relevant groups or agencies were invited to attend. For example, if local security issues were discussed at these meetings, the council would invite the chief of police to attend. If health issues were discussed at these meetings, the council would invite health center personnel to attend. The Commune Council recorded what took place at meetings and maintained that it then disseminated the information to commune residents. The commune clerk mentioned that the Commune Council had passed seven orders or *deika* but the content of these orders was unclear.

Working relationships

According to the Commune Council, the members had not encountered major problems in working together although at times they expressed opposing ideas. The commune chief played a decisive role in facilitating differences of opinion and bringing the members to an agreement. Interviewed separately, the councilor who was a Funcinpec party member related that he had encountered some difficulties, as the sole voice not affiliated with the CPP. In a few cases the other commune councilors had agreed with him, but in many other instances they had not. Nevertheless, he perceived a major difference in the commune administration before and after the Commune Council election. He stated that villagers now dared to speak out and make demands on the commune authorities. Before people could not do this because

the commune chief was appointed by top officials from government. Now that the people had elected the Commune Council they were able to exact more accountability. The Funcinpec council member likewise spoke highly of the commitment of the commune chief and the integrity of the Seila program. He noted that while some government donations were channeled to richer people and to CPP members, this did not happen in the Seila program.

World Vision staff similarly agreed that the Commune Council in Kraing Leav made decisions which reflected the majority view of the councilors and not simply the personal view of the commune chief as dictated from above. However, these staff pointed out that CPP members of the Commune Council usually followed each other in decision-making. As such, the Funcinpec councilor could not contest the positions of the CPP members. While decision-making processes had opened up under the new administration, the commune chief in Kraing Leav, as the leader of the majority party, still exerted considerable influence on the outcome of decisions made. Nevertheless, World Vision staff argued that more representation on the Commune Council had helped to build up stronger ties with villages and therefore commune authorities were more aware of what was going on.

Village viewpoints

To get a clearer idea of villager viewpoints, the research team talked to people in three commune villages in geographically dispersed locations: Kraing Leav, Tuol Sleng, and Prohuth.

Two commune councilors lived in Kraing Leav village. Generally, villagers found the commune councilors accessible and able to respond to requests for items such as rice seeds and fertilizer. Importantly, the councilors fulfilled the expectations of the people by attending funerals and other ceremonies. Kraing Leav villagers considered the commune authorities in the past as hardworking and now viewed the commune councilors similarly. The difference now was that the councilors were greater in numbers. Every month, the council invited the Kraing Leav village chief to attend the regular meetings and if development issues were discussed the VDC was also invited. Importantly, the Commune Council members, and especially the commune chief, had talked with various development agencies about how to assist the commune.

Tuol Sleng villagers were able to name only a few members of the Commune Council. This notwithstanding, they too appreciated the habit of the councilors, and especially the commune chief, to attend weddings and other ceremonies in the village and to provide rice to the poor in times of need. The elected commune chief was popular now as he had been before as the appointed commune chief. The villagers said that he was approachable and always smiled and talked with the people. They said that he was intelligent, had good relationships with the people, and had ensured good security within the village.

Villagers interviewed in Prohuth likewise mentioned that the commune chief regularly visited the village and attended weddings, funerals and different kinds of services. The commune chief also tried to respond to the needs of the people by mobilizing resources from NGOs and other agencies to build roads and wells. Villagers recounted that before the election the commune chief used to make decisions on his own. Now the Commune Council made decisions based on the majority view of the members. The villagers thought that the Commune Council had a high commitment to do its work, but indicated that it would not have been able to achieve as much without the support from Seila or the NGOs.

Planning and Implementing Activities

The planning process

With respect to development planning, the Commune Council reported that assessments were conducted in each village to identify and prioritize individual village needs. This was accomplished with support from the Seila staff who provided training in planning and budgeting. As required by law, a commune Planning and Budgeting Committee was formed with commune councilors, village chiefs, and VDCs as members. At the commune level Seila staff provided assistance to the committee in prioritizing and consolidating commune needs based on the particular needs of the villages. The consolidated document was written up as the 5-year Commune Development Plan.

The civil society representatives interviewed at the commune center affirmed that needs assessments had indeed been accomplished with the village chiefs and VDCs playing the key roles. The village chiefs brought the results of the needs assessments to the Commune Councils to be incorporated and consolidated into the 5-year commune plan. Needs voiced by the villagers included toilets, wells, drainages, irrigation systems, bridges, houses, schools, mango trees, and pig pens. Once the Commune Council had determined the commune priorities for implementation the village chiefs and VDCs disseminated the plan to the villagers.

World Vision staff estimated that 65 to 70 per cent of villagers in the commune had participated in the planning process. Seila staff provided support to the planning process and discussed needs separately with men and women. The Planning and Budgeting Committee was formed in Kraing Leav with the village chiefs taking a leading role. World Vision staff said that the villagers usually accepted the 5-year and yearly plans with few changes. Seila finalized the plans according to the prescribed format. The whole process took one week. Afterwards, the Commune Council presented the plans at the annual District Integration Workshop. World Vision agreed to fund projects, which were in line with their yearly activities.

While the commune councilors, civil society representatives, and World Vision staff interviewed were articulate and largely consistent in their understanding of the planning process, interviews with villagers revealed a more mixed understanding of the process and their involvement in it. In Kraing Leav some village respondents expressed some confusion about the commune planning process. They had attended meetings with the village chief, the VDCs, NGOs, and development agencies but it was unclear whether the process had produced the 5-year commune plan or other projects supported by these groups. Other villagers in Kraing Leav stated that they had been invited to attend meetings with the Commune Council to discuss development projects such as school construction and fertilizer distribution but that they were unaware of any planning activities.

One group of villagers interviewed in Tuol Sleng village likewise remarked that they knew nothing about the planning activities. They remembered that the village chief had shared the commune plan with them but they could not recall any specific details in the plan.

In Prohuth village informal groups of villagers interviewed were more aware of the planning activities. In separate interviews, two groups declared that they had attended the village planning meetings to discuss the needs of the people. Many people, they said, had attended the meetings and were asked to identify and prioritize their needs. In Prohuth needs raised by the villagers included roads, wells, houses for the poor, toilets, and cows. These were submitted to the Commune Council by the village chief and VDCs. Later, the village chief

and the VDCs reported back to the villagers about what had been included in the commune plan.

Implementing activities

In 2002 and 2003 the Kraing Leav Commune Council successfully implemented major projects identified in its 5-year commune plan. The Commune Council built one school in 2002 and three more in 2003. The Commune Council also repaired a road of 6.2 kilometers from Roong village to Ponhear Kok village that was constantly flooded in the rainy season. In addition the Commune Council worked with World Vision to repair a four-kilometer road from Cheuteal Chrom village to Tabee village. Another major project of the Commune Council was the ongoing repair of the Tromnup Thnol Dach reservoir that was undertaken with support from the Department of Water Resources and Spean Kampuchea-Holland. In addition the council had built wells and toilets. The Commune Council did not distribute the funds for these projects themselves but contracted the work to private sector companies through a bidding process. The companies who won the bids and implemented the projects were paid through the bank.

When implementing infrastructure projects, the Commune Council required villagers to contribute 10 per cent of the total project costs. Normally seven per cent was allocated for labor and three per cent for cash, although most villagers preferred to contribute all 10 per cent in cash. In Kraing Leav the Commune Council had encountered difficulties in collecting village contributions for school construction. The Commune Council and Seila staff followed up the implementation of the projects. In Prohuth villagers said that they contributed labor, money, and materials for projects such as roads, wells, and toilets. In Kraing Leav village the village chief said that the government provided materials for projects and the people contributed their labor.

Partnerships with Civil Society

Relationships with village organizations

In Kraing Leav the Commune Council worked primarily through the village chiefs as the commune authorities had done in the past. As an extension of the state structure the appointed village chiefs were not part of civil society. At the same time the Commune Council in Kraing Leav relied heavily on the VDCs in the villages to assist in the planning and coordination of development activities. The elected VDCs, which were independent from the state and part of civil society, had shown themselves responsive to work with the Commune Council. This was perhaps partially explained by the fact that the VDCs were formed under the Seila program and were therefore still very much supportive of Seila activities. Had the VDCs been formed by an NGO with a large development program to coordinate, it was likely that they would have been less responsive.

Relationships with NGOs

One reason why the Commune Council had achieved so much in such a short time was that it had received strong support from NGOs and development agencies. These organizations included: World Vision assisting in agriculture, education, and road construction, CEDAC assisting in agriculture, RACHA assisting in health, RDRP assisting in agriculture and fertilizer, Spean Kampuchea-Holland assisting in education and water management, HEKS assisting in agriculture and clean water, and Enfants et Developpement assisting in health. Not all projects of these groups were included in the commune 5-year plan or implemented by the Commune Council. Nonetheless, the councilors, and especially the commune chief, had proactively sought the support of various organizations for development assistance. Of

note, people in Kraing Leav, Tuol Sleng, and Provuth villages acknowledged the contribution of the NGOs in helping the Commune Council realize development in the commune.

In most instances the relationship between the Commune Council and the NGOs was one of collaboration, i.e. the NGOs and Commune Council informed each other of their planned activities and sought ways to coordinate activities. In other instances the relationship was more of an emerging partnership with NGOs and Commune Councils working together to realize common goals. To their credit the NGOs working in Kraing Leav commune had shown a willingness to support activities contained in the commune plan. This led them to a closer working relationship with the Commune Council and away from their own strictly parallel development programs. In this respect the District Integration Workshop held once a year provided the commune chief an opportunity to present the revised yearly plan in a coherent manner and for the various organizations to see more clearly how they might support what had been presented in the plans.

On their part the World Vision staff felt that the one-day District Integration Workshop forced the development agencies to accept projects in a short time. They felt that the District Integration Workshop would be more beneficial if the Commune Council conducted preliminary negotiations with potential donors after the planning process to clarify which projects they might accept. World Vision accepted to work with the Commune Council on projects related to wells, road construction, drainages, pipes, toilets, and agriculture training. World Vision had signed contracts with the Commune Council to implement projects. The projects were implemented by World Vision, the VDC, and the people and monitored by the Commune Council.

Relationships with National Government and Political Parties

The Kraing Leav Commune Council was acutely aware that it was formed under the laws of the Royal Government of Cambodia and followed as best it could the guidelines set out by the Ministry of Interior. The Commune Council reported the results of their meetings to district and provincial officials through the commune clerk. Every year in October the Commune Council members also attended the District Integration Workshop. The commune chief had good relations with the government sector and the ability to attract many donors to the proposed commune plans. The Commune Council also had direct relationships with Ministers of Parliament in Phnom Penh, which allowed them to have direct access to the central levels of government.

According to the district governor of Bati District, the Commune Council in Kraing Leav conducted regular meetings once a month. They were also good in implementing the work delegated to them by the government. The Commune Council members in Kraing Leav cooperated well with each other and had the management skill to lead their commune. With all but one of the nine councilors members of the CPP, inter party rivalry was minimal.

Appendix 2
CASE STUDY #2

Champey Commune
AngkorChey District
Kampot Province

Selected and Supported by
GTZ

Background

Champey commune was one of 11 communes in Angkor Chey district in Kampot province. Champey was comprised of eight villages and a total 1,762 households. The main sources of livelihood were rice farming and the cultivation of cash crops. Food security was a critical issue in the commune as rice farmers lacked an irrigation system and suffered from low rice yields. In 2001 and 2002 the commune experienced droughts and flooding. Road networks within the commune also needed to be improved. The main development organizations working in the commune were Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (German Technical Cooperation) (GTZ) and the World Food Programme (WFP).

GTZ started working in the commune in 1996 under its Integrated Food Security Program (IFSP). This involved five projects: agriculture, rice credit, village infrastructure, health, and small scale vegetable food processing. GTZ helped villages form village development committees (VDCs), which implemented GTZ supported activities such as rice banks, cash credit, and tables for hire associations. GTZ also supported food-for-work schemes for improving village roads. Since April 2002 GTZ had shifted the focus of its program to support decentralization and community development. This program built the capacities of district and provincial officials in support of commune level decentralization.

The Champey Commune Council was composed of six members, all men. The commune chief and three other councilors were Cambodia People's Party (CPP) members. One other commune councilor was a Funcinpec party member and still another was Sam Rainsy party member. (A seventh councilor, a Funcinpec member, had died since the election.) The currently elected commune chief had also been the appointed commune chief from 1980 until the February 2002 election.

Commune Administration

Changes since the Commune Council formation

Although the Commune Council had been in operation for less than two years, the members perceived noticeable differences since its formation. Before the commune authorities depended on officials at the top for direction and plans. Now the commune councilors had clearly delineated roles and were able to assume more responsibility. This, they noted, enabled them to respond more directly to the problems of the people. The fact that Funcinpec and Sam Rainy members were part of the commune leadership likewise lessened favoritism towards CPP members.

Representatives of civil society associations interviewed at the commune center mentioned that the commune council now took more responsibility for what transpired at the village level. Before the commune chief simply authorized approval of requests submitted to him by the village chiefs. Now the Commune Council members took a more direct role in assuring

that security was maintained and that natural resources were protected. Thefts of cattle and instances of electrofishing had been reduced. Similarly, the commune chief no longer made all the decisions. The current approach was participatory with members of different parties involved in decision-making. The district governor of Angkor Chey likewise noted that previously only the commune chief held power. The decentralization process now encouraged people's participation and making decisions with persons of different political parties.

GTZ staff pointed out that formerly commune authorities did not receive training to enable them to better fulfill their roles. Now GTZ and Provincial and District Facilitation Teams provided training on Commune Council orientation, village plan development, project design, financial management, investment planning, and contract bidding. Due to the increased responsibilities of the Commune Council GTZ staff felt that the councilors still needed more training in commune administration, planning and financial management, documentation and filing, and communication with villagers and higher authorities. The district governor of Angkor Chey likewise underscored the efforts of the government to build the capacity of commune councilors in administration, financial planning, and project management.

Performance

The Commune Council reported that it conducted regular monthly meetings at which time members added their own agenda items and sought solutions to problems through discussion. The members also conducted extraordinary meetings when issuing commune orders or *deika* and when conducting the planning process. Of note, the Commune Council provided reports to the district office and the District Facilitation Team, but it had not shared these reports more widely. The civil society representatives maintained that more needed to be done to improve communication and information sharing between commune officials and village people. GTZ district staff likewise stated that the Commune Council needed to disseminate more information to the people. They noted that while transparency had improved, some gaps still existed. For example, only the commune chief and the commune clerk handled commune fees leaving open the possibility of corruption.

The Champey Commune Council was actively involved in issuing commune orders. Some dealt with the formation of the Planning and Budgeting Committee and procedures of various village associations such as the rice bank and the tables for hire groups. Others addressed community problems such as electrofishing in rice fields and ponds, the prevention of animals from destroying crops, and conflict resolution among commune residents. While implementation of orders related to community problems was difficult, the Commune Council was, in large part, able to enact the laws it promulgated. Regarding the dissemination of state law, the Commune Council announced the need to register births, marriages, and deaths but to date few people came to the commune office to register. At the same time, the national land law had been shared and observed.

Village viewpoints

To get a clearer idea of villager views, the research team conducted informal focus group interviews with commune residents in three geographically dispersed villages: Tonle Neam, Doem Por, and K'avav.

In general, residents of Tonle Neam village noted favorably the improvement in village security since the Commune Council assumed office and the efforts to stop illegal fishing and prevent animals from destroying crops. Most groups interviewed knew that two commune councilors lived in the village. One group remarked concisely that the main tasks of the

Commune Council were to protect the people, crack down on crime, develop the villages and the commune, and issue regulations like the ban against electrofishing. But for the most part the groups interviewed lacked a practical understanding of the decentralization process and how the Commune Council was a part of this.

Part of the problem was that the commune councilors had not taken adequate steps to communicate with the villagers from Tonle Neam. They preferred to channel their reports through the village chief and VDC, and the information did not always reach the people. While the village chief regularly attended Commune Council meetings and the VDC participated actively in the planning process, attempts to raise awareness of Tonle Neam village constituents about decentralization and to incorporate them more directly in the administrative reform process remained insufficient. Training provided by GTZ through provincial and district teams also focused on the commune councilors themselves.

In Doem Por village, members of village associations interviewed in one focus group were quite enthusiastic about the changes that had taken place under the Commune Council. They mentioned improvements in local security, achievements in commune development, more transparency in financial management, and close relations between the Commune Council and villagers. They said that village associations met often with commune councilors to discuss local development. This group noted that the Commune Council had reported to people about road project activities, had issued regulations about the formation of committees, and had likewise issued regulations to prevent illegal fishing and cattle from destroying crops. Still they pointed out that the capacities of the Commune Council members were limited and that they tended to adopt a top-down approach.

The Doem Por village chief and deputy village chief were likewise encouraged by the changes that had taken place. They mentioned that the current administration was participatory while the former one was monopolized by the commune chief. This was noteworthy, as the current and former commune chief was the same person. At the same time, the second deputy commune chief was a member of the Sam Rainy party who lived in the village. While supporting the efforts of the Commune Council to ban illegal fishing, the village chief and deputy village chief complained about the behavior of the commune police who, they said, defied the order and continued to electrocute fish.

Other groups of villagers interviewed informally in Doem Por had mixed reactions to the accomplishments of the Commune Council. One group mentioned that the second deputy chief living in the village regularly attended meetings of the village development associations. This group also noted that the Commune Council was more active than the previous administration in undertaking development projects such as road construction. Another group acknowledged the benefits of the infrastructure activities implemented by the Commune Council but felt that the projects did not respond to the people's real need for food security. Still another group saw little change in commune administration attributing the gains in road improvement and school construction to international organizations. In general, Doem Por residents not involved in village associations had less practical understanding of the role of the Commune Council and the decentralization process. They interacted with commune councilors only during festival days, Buddhist ceremonies, and weddings

In K'vav village a group of village association members remarked that the Commune Council had been more actively engaged in development activities than the commune authorities previously. As a result the commune chief visited the village to plan and monitor development projects while before he had remained at his home. Still this group complained that the plans of the village associations were not integrated into the Commune Development

Plan. They asserted that they were not adequately involved in the planning process and heard little about the activities of the Commune Council since it relied on the village chief to liaise with the people. At the same time, the group appreciated the efforts of the Commune Council to issue regulations on the protection of crops and fish stocks, and the reduction of domestic violence.

Other groups of villagers interviewed informally in K'vav were likewise aware of the regulations passed by the Commune Council on security, the protection of crops from cattle, and the ban on illegal fishing. But generally many of those interviewed felt that the Commune Council did not keep in close touch with the people and so they did not know much about the council members or what they did. Villagers who had attended meetings said that they were given instructions but not asked to share their own ideas.

Planning and Implementing Activities

The planning process

The Commune Council reported that they had formed a Planning and Budgeting Committee with 40 members selected from the eight villages of the commune. The Planning and Budgeting Committee included the Commune Council members, the village chiefs, and representatives from civil society such as the VDCs. With support from Seila staff and the District Facilitation Team, the committee gathered information regarding needs in each village. The results of these surveys were discussed during village meetings and the needs were prioritized. Committee members then attended the commune workshop on planning with the commune councilors. At this workshop they consolidated the village priorities into a commune plan in accord with the budget commitment from the national government. According to the councilors, the 5-year planning document was compiled and written by the commune clerk. Copies were forwarded to each village, the District Facilitation Team, provincial authorities, and GTZ. Each village assumed responsibility for sharing the results of the plan to villagers and for informing them about the respective projects designated for their village.

Commune Council and Budgeting and Planning Committee members subsequently attended the District Integration Workshop to present the Champey commune plan to district officials, line agencies, NGOs, and other development agencies. Members of the Planning and Budgeting Committee from each village attended the annual District Integration Workshop so that the needs and problems of each village could be explained clearly. Committee members thought that the District Integration Workshops were useful because they drew attention to village and commune situations, and obtained support for projects. As a result of the workshops, government and development agencies committed to support various projects such as health training, wells, and road repair.

Civil society representatives interviewed at the commune center acknowledged that they had participated in the commune planning process. Priority needs were identified at village levels and approved at the commune level. Village association leaders, village chiefs, Planning and Budgeting Committee members, and commune councilors actively participated in the planning process. However, the civil society leaders pointed out that the participation of villagers was more uneven.

In Tonle Neam village, the VDC and village association members interviewed were actively involved in the planning sessions. However, ordinary villagers were unable to recall the agenda of the meetings and indicated that they had observed rather than actively participated

in the discussions. Often villagers expressed some confusion about meetings convened to discuss planning and meetings held to discuss implementation.

In Doem Por village, the VDC and members of village interest groups were likewise very much involved in developing the commune plan. During a focus group interview with village association members in Doem Por the respondents were able to recall the process in detail and to list the priority projects that were decided upon. However, other groups of villagers interviewed in Doem Por found it difficult to distinguish between meetings called to plan projects and meetings called to solicit counterpart contributions for their implementation. There was also some confusion about meetings convened for commune development planning and NGO project planning.

In K'vav village, one group of villagers interviewed clearly described their participation in the planning activities and enumerated the priority projects that were decided upon. By contrast, another group of villagers interviewed were vague and uncertain about their participation in the planning sessions.

Implementing activities

According to the Commune Council the projects implemented to date under the 5-year commune plan included: three roads and two wells in Champey village; one road and one culvert in Tonle Neam village; two roads in Sre Chea village; one culvert in Ang Choat village; two roads in Deum Pothi village; two roads and one pump well in Nong Sahek village; and one road in Krasaing village. The commune council revealed that it had received a one-year budget allocation of 33.42 million riels from the national government for the implementation of the plan. Seila provided infrastructure (roads, water gates, wells) and agriculture support (seed and fertilizer use, animal raising and skills training) through the commune fund. Villagers too provided counterpart funding for infrastructure projects. GTZ and other development agencies contributed funds, and generous individual donors from abroad and from Phnom Penh likewise provided financial resources. The funds of development agencies and individual donors supported projects such as agriculture training, animal health, irrigation, credit, health care and nutrition. The Commune Council generated additional revenue from the collection of fees for birth, marriage, and death registration, which they deposited at the provincial treasury of Kampot.

The Commune Council explained that large infrastructure projects funded through the commune plan were contracted through bidding. The Commune Council and the District Facilitation Team managed the bidding process. The successful contractors who won the bids withdrew money directly from the bank. With support from GTZ and the District Facilitation Team, the Commune Council maintained that it and the Planning and Budgeting Committee supervised the project implementation process and made sure that the contractors followed the specifications of the agreements. The Commune Council likewise reported that it and the Planning and Budgeting Committee monitored the projects. Village beneficiaries were responsible for ongoing maintenance. In some instances, the Commune Council encountered difficulties in collecting villager contributions and in dealing with individuals whose property had been affected by the road construction.

Civil society representatives interviewed at the commune level proudly noted that local villagers shared resources towards the implementation of the commune development projects. This helped to build local ownership of the projects. Other projects were implemented on a food-for-work basis, which allowed the villagers to enhance their food security while benefiting from the road or culvert built. At the same time, the civil society respondents complained that the Commune Council's management of funds was not always

transparent. In addition, project implementation was often delayed by late disbursement of funds from the national treasury. The civil society group argued that the Commune Council needed more training in financial management.

Partnerships Between Commune Council and Civil Society

Relationships with village organizations

The Commune Council recounted that they assigned individual members to work closely with VDCs and village associations such as the rice bank, credit, and tables for hire groups.

On their part, civil society representatives interviewed at the commune center disclosed that village association members and commune councilors interacted with each other during village meetings. The commune councilors attended rice bank meetings but not others. The civil society leaders argued that the councilors should be present at these other meetings as well. The civil society group stated further that village associations made reports to the commune chief and the Commune Council regularly, although they did not attend Commune Council meetings. The village associations desired to participate in meetings at the commune office to disseminate information about their development projects. Interestingly, the Commune Council checked the financial documents of the village development groups and audited their activities. From the view of the research team, this appeared to be a blurring of lines between civil society and the local state.

The civil society group affirmed that village development associations had contributed to the development of the commune plan. They had also joined other villagers in commune development activities such as the construction of roads. If asked to do so, the Commune Council would provide assistance to the village associations. For example, the table association had submitted a request for funds to the Commune Council for making shelters for wedding receptions.

In Tonle Neam village, the Commune Council had approved the implementation of two priority projects. The first project was the construction of a gravel road and the second was the laying of culverts. The village development associations provided counterpart funding for the two projects, which were obtained from the credit scheme and the village construction committee.

In Doem Por, a group of civil society leaders said that relations between village associations and the Commune Council were characterized by good cooperation, non-interference in each other's affairs, and open communication.

In K'vav village a group of civil society members admitted that cooperation was good between village associations and the Commune Council. The Commune Council helped to check the lists and documents of the rice bank association. On its part, the rice bank association contributed counterpart funding in making the road. GTZ initiated this arrangement for generating counterpart funds. The Commune Council represented the interests of the association and sometimes dealt with the issue of nonpayment of debts. Again from the viewpoint of the research team, this indicated an undesirable merging of responsibilities between civil society and the local state.

Relationship with NGOs

The Commune Council acknowledged that they had collaborated with development agencies such as GTZ and Reproductive and Child Health Alliance (RACHA) in health projects, which were channeled through the commune health center. GTZ had provided training

support to the village health volunteers. GTZ had also provided 9 million riels for road construction by adding red gravel to the existing road. The Shanti Volunteer Association (SVA) supported two schools.

Relationships with National Government and Political Parties

The commune chief attended meetings at the district level. When he returned he shared the information with the council members from the three parties. The Commune Council made and submitted reports to the district level.

The district governor acted as the head of the District Development Committee. Seila provided funds for commune development directly through the commune and not through the district. These funds were for administration and development. The district office cooperated with Seila because some district officials worked directly with Seila. But the district chief did not participate in the Seila program. Provincial departments of agriculture and health provided training at the village level. The Commune Council disseminated information to political parties mostly through their members in the Commune Council.

**Chres Commune
Chumkiri District
Kampot Province**

**Selected and Supported by
CIDSE Cambodia**

Background

Chres was one of seven communes of Chumkiri district in Kampot province. The commune was comprised of four villages with 1,141 households. The main source of income was rice farming. Making fish traps for sale was a popular secondary activity. The average farm size of commune households was 0.5 hectare and average paddy rice yields were about 1.5 tons. With only one rice crop per year food shortages were common.

Development agencies particularly Cooperation Internationale pour le Developpement et la Solidarite (CIDSE) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) had supported development activities in the four villages in areas of education, health care, agriculture, and credit. Specific projects included rice banks, pig banks, cow banks, self-help groups, literacy classes, village libraries, traditional birth attendants, veterinarians, family gardens, rice demonstration plots, health care, clean water, latrines, fertilizer, credit, culverts and roads. These activities notwithstanding the commune still lacked village-to-village roads, a well-maintained irrigation system, and adequate health center services. There was potential for a large dam to be built in the commune that would permit two rice crops per year.

In 1994 CIDSE started an Integrated Rural Development (ICD) program in the four villages of Chres commune. After conducting participatory rural assessments (PRAs) CIDSE established village development committees (VDCs) to first manage and then coordinate development activities that included agriculture improvement and self-help credit groups as well as infrastructure projects such as culverts, libraries, and school buildings. More recently, CIDSE facilitated village development planning for the ICD projects which it funded.

The Chres Commune Council had five members: three from the Cambodia People's Party (CPP), one from the Funcinpec party, and one from the Sam Rainsy party. The commune chief was a CPP member. All of the commune councilors were men. The commune clerk was a woman.

Commune Administration

Changes since the Commune Council formation

Perhaps the major change that had taken place as a result of the Commune Council formation was the election of a new commune chief. Many Chres villagers were dissatisfied with the way the former commune chief had dealt with the occupation of commune land by government soldiers. The election provided the residents with an opportunity to replace the former commune chief, who was a CPP member, with the current commune chief, who was likewise a CPP member. Although the former chief lost the top position, he still received enough votes to be included on the council. While the parameters of change - choosing one

member of the majority party over another - may seem limited, Chres villagers had an opportunity to make a choice which was not available to them under the previous system of appointments.

Commune Council members maintained that there was now more transparency in commune administration than before. Information on commune issues and on financial allocations for development projects were now shared with the people. Similarly, the participation of Funcinpec and Sam Rainy members on the Commune Council allowed for dissenting views, although the positions of the CPP members and especially the commune chief still dominated. Furthermore, the Commune Council had become involved in planning and implementing development projects. Other than this, the commune councilors conceded that the administration of the commune had changed little.

Civil society representatives interviewed at the commune center emphasized that change had taken place with respect to the Commune Council's involvement in development activities. Under the former administration no participatory planning had taken place. Still with regard to commune administration and security the civil society respondents observed that not much had changed. While these leaders were invited to attend meetings on development programming they were not invited to attend meetings concerning administrative issues. Similarly, the civil society representatives were unaware of decisions and circulars from higher levels of government since the Commune Council never publicized them.

Performance

The Commune Council convened regular monthly meetings and made monthly reports to the district office. At times the council likewise held special meetings about commune development projects. The Provincial Office for Local Administration (POLA) and the Department of Local Administration (DOLA) provided training to the Commune Council in orientation, planning, and financial management. CIDSE and the Commune Council Support Project (CCSP) similarly conducted training to build the capacity of the Commune Council. The district governor noted that some commune councilors in Chumkiri lacked formal education and that this made it difficult for them to fulfill their roles.

The Chres Commune Council had passed several commune orders or *deika*. However, the councilors could not recall these orders from memory. They conceded that only one regulation, that forming the Planning and Budgeting Committee, had been enacted. The councilors acknowledged that these orders, as well decisions made by the Commune Council and directives from the higher level government, had not been disseminated to the people. The Commune Council met with constituents only to discuss development projects and people's contributions to these projects.

Village viewpoints

To get a clearer idea of villager perceptions, the research team talked to people in three geographically dispersed villages: Chres, Trapaing Chhoeat, and Taten.

In Chres village, the informal groups interviewed perceived little difference in commune administration since the formation of the Commune Council. The villagers were aware that there were now more commune officials than before and that they came from three different political parties. But they did not know the councilors well since they never discussed their roles in public, made reports about their work, or publicized instructions and circulars from higher levels of government. In general, the villagers interacted with the Commune Council as they had interacted with commune authorities in the past. They approached the Commune Council to mediate quarrels between husbands and wives, to report stolen cows, and to

resolve land disputes. As in the past, the villagers were not always satisfied with the way the commune officials resolved these issues.

In Chres village, group respondents explained that the commune councilors convened village meetings primarily to discuss people's counterpart contributions to development projects. The councilors were concerned with the practical aspects of project implementation and asked villagers how much labor they could provide to build roads, schools, and irrigation canals. The commune councilors did not take an active role in village planning but relied on the Seila District Facilitation Team and NGOs like CIDSE to accomplish these tasks. Similarly, the Commune Council channeled information to the villagers through the village chiefs.

In Trapaing Chhoeteal village, small groups interviewed noted that in the previous administration the commune chief had made decisions by himself without consultation. Now more commune councilors were involved in decision-making and the council consulted villagers regarding development projects. One group felt that the Commune Council had improved security reducing theft and robberies. Other groups mentioned the strong presence of the Commune Council in the implementation of infrastructure projects such as road and school construction. Most groups interviewed said that the Commune Council usually met with villagers to discuss the counterpart costs of funding development projects. Aside from reports on development projects, most groups knew little about Commune Council activities. Interestingly, a respondent in one group declared that if the Commune Council did not perform well, he would vote for other candidates in the next election.

In Taten village, groups similarly noted that the Commune Council was involved in supporting development projects such as roads, dams, and school buildings. Most groups reported that the Commune Council had met with villagers to discuss counterpart contributions. They knew nothing of the regulations the council had passed or other aspects of their work. In large measure, the village groups interviewed in Taten looked to the Commune Council, as they had to the former commune authorities, to mediate disputes between spouses and villagers, and to investigate the theft of stolen cows. With respect to development activities, there was some confusion about projects contained in the commune plan implemented by the Commune Council and those implemented independently by NGOs like CIDSE.

Planning and Implementing Activities

The planning process

The Chres Planning and Budgeting Committee was composed of the five Commune Council members, the four village chiefs, four VDC members, and two village representatives. This committee developed the 5-year commune plan with support from CIDSE, FAO, and the District Facilitation Team. In a separate interview the District Facilitation Team explained that there were 5 stages and 11 steps in the process of making the plan. The steps included gathering and analyzing survey data, identifying needs with villagers, integrating village needs into commune priorities, making strategic goals, designing commune projects with cost estimates, and identifying funds available for commune projects.

According to members of the Planning and Budgeting Committee, people's participation in the planning process was encouraged. The village chiefs and VDCs first helped villagers identify priority needs and projects, which were then discussed with the Planning and Budgeting Committee. Commune level meetings were then held to prioritize and consolidate the projects into a commune plan. The facilitators helped to write the plan which, once approved by the Commune Council, was submitted to the district and provincial authorities.

Some problems were encountered in project implementation since villagers were at times reluctant to provide contributions of labor and counterpart funds. Part of this was apparently due to the identification of commune councilors with political parties. The Planning and Budgeting Committee members interviewed stated that cooperation was still weak among the commune councilors, the civil society members of the committee, and the people.

After the 5-year plan was written, the Chres commune chief presented it at the annual District Integration Workshop to generate financial support from NGOs and development agencies over and above the commune fund received from the government. CIDSE and FAO agreed to support several projects in the plan. Usually the commune chief attended the District Integration Workshop with only the first or second deputy. Similarly, members of the Planning and Budgeting Committee did not attend the workshop.

Implementing activities

In Chres commune projects implemented under the 5-year plan were mostly infrastructure projects. In 2002 the Chres Commune Council built one school with two classrooms, one road, and one watergate. The budget for these projects was 31 million riels. Villagers contributed an additional 3 million riels. Of note, not all Chres households contributed counterpart funds as required under the local government regulations. Households residing in a village where a project was implemented were asked to pay 5000 riels, while households residing in other villages were asked to pay 2500 riels. Planning and Budgeting Committee members lamented that while people agreed to implement projects, they were reluctant to help with labor and counterpart funds. The Commune Council tried to collect counterpart funds from the people during harvest time, so that they would know how much funds were available to implement the plan.

In 2003, Chres commune received an additional 28 million riels from the commune development fund and 2.5 million riels from local contributions. CIDSE and FAO supplied other funds through their own organizations. The commune funds were kept in the provincial treasury. Contractors undertook project implementation through competitive bidding. If a contractor won a bid to build a school the company would draw the money from the provincial treasury. Meanwhile, the Planning and Budgeting Committee was charged to monitor the implementation of the activity. But members of the Planning and Budgeting Committee complained that they did not know all the details about project expenditures.

According to members of the Planning and Budgeting Committee, the Commune Council did not publicize the expenditures incurred by the commune. Members of the Planning and Budgeting Committee wanted to know more about the money spent and the financial monitoring system in place. The Planning and Budgeting Committee members said that they monitored project activities regularly and were in charge of maintenance. Committee members maintained that some structures were not made according to proper technical specifications.

The Planning and Budgeting Committee members interviewed were concerned that people's participation was not satisfactory and that plans made had not been fully implemented. The committee was worried about the sustainability of achievements. At the same time, the committee was gratified to see that people in the commune had gained visible benefits from project activities. The committee members interviewed stressed the importance of honesty and people's participation. They maintained that commune income and expenditure records should be made available to all residents.

Partnerships Between Commune Council and Civil Society

Relationships with village organizations

For most administrative matters the Commune Council worked through the village chiefs. With respect to development planning and implementation the Commune Council worked closely with the larger Planning and Budgeting Committee. This committee was comprised of nine members from local government including the Commune Council and village chiefs and six representatives of civil society, mostly VDC members. While the civil society members of the Planning and Budgeting Committee maintained that cooperation with the local government authorities was still weak, projects had nevertheless been planned and implemented. Moreover, VDCs and village associations in the commune had actively participated in commune planning processes and contributed their labor and cash to project implementation.

Perhaps the disappointment of the civil society groups with their relationship with the commune councilors reflected their own high expectations of what the relationship should look like. Within CIDSE's ICD program village association leaders in Chres had received numerous trainings, participated in countless workshops, and managed their own development projects. Their frustration with the pace of change, the underlying political party ties, and the lack of complete transparency underscored the level of their own development as participants in the ICD program since the mid-1990s. While partnerships were still being formed and tested, closer working relationships between local government authorities and village organizations had been established and the overall outlook was hopeful. CIDSE's formation of the VDC association at the commune level looked to strengthen the voice of civil society with the commune councilors.

Relationships with NGOs

With regard to CIDSE, the Chres Commune Council had coordinated with CIDSE in village development planning and attempts had been made to integrate CIDSE's ICD plans into the commune plan. At the same time CIDSE's development efforts in Chres commune were much more extensive than those contained in the commune 5-year plan and in large measure still constituted a parallel program to that of the local government. For the most part villagers did not distinguish which projects fell under the commune plan and which fell under CIDSE's own plan. This was understandable for some projects in the commune plan were funded by CIDSE. At the same time the provincial and district government had improved commune roads prior to the formation of the Commune Council, and these accomplishments were often seen as an outcome of the work of the Commune Council. Clearly, the relatively small commune of Chres had been the beneficiary of a large number of rural development projects and the achievements of the district government, the Commune Council, NGOs, and development agencies mutually reinforced each other.

In its current 2003-2005 program CIDSE had as one of its objectives the aim to build the capacity of Commune Councils in the seven communes of Chumkiri district. This was a conscious effort to support the process of participatory local governance. Still a strategic long-term vision was generally lacking. CIDSE implemented its own ICD program through VDCs and self-help or interest groups. CIDSE also supported the Commune Council to implement development activities primarily through village chiefs. Support of civil society through VDCs and village associations and support of local government through Commune Councils and village chiefs were not necessarily mutually exclusive approaches. But at the same time the long-term direction of CIDSE's program was unclear. Did they intend to reduce the funding of their parallel development program and increase their contributions to the commune fund? Did they intend to balance support of civil society associations with

support for local government? Did they take sufficient steps to enhance civil society's capacity to hold the Commune Council accountable for its actions? Did they have a clear idea of what mutually beneficial relationships between civil society and local government would look like?

Relationships with National Government and Political Parties

Before the Commune Council election, the district governor of Chumkiri was actively involved in developing road infrastructure in the district. Once the Chres Commune Council was formed, the district governor fully supported the development activities in the commune. The district governor likewise cooperated with the Seila program and convened meetings between Seila staff and commune councilors to resolve problems that arose in project implementation. The district officials monitored the infrastructure projects implemented in the commune and often accompanied the commune councilors to collect the people's counterpart contributions. Provincial line managers, particularly from the Department of Agriculture, also inspected the road and water dam projects in the commune.

While the commune councilors from the three main political parties had established working relationships, their party affiliation was a factor in how they carried out their work. The commune chief and two members of the majority CPP were able to overrule objections from the two members of the minority parties. Similarly, all the commune councilors looked to win villagers over to their own parties. On their part, villagers normally approached Commune Council members of their own party when they had dealing with the commune council. The district governor said that they was pressure from party officials to gain benefits for the party which led councilors to collect counterpart project funding from villagers even during times of food shortages.

**Phteas Rung Commune
Kravanh District
Pursat Province**

**Selected and Supported by
Partnership for Local Governance**

Background

Phteas Rung was one of seven communes in Kravanh district in Pursat province. Phteas Rung commune was comprised of 13 villages. The main sources of livelihood of village households were rice farming and the cultivation of cash crops such as melon, groundnut, and corn. Villagers also gathered vines, rattan, cardamom, and crystal stones for sale. In the past three years rice farmers had suffered low yields from droughts. This caused some households to sell their rice fields and migrate to the Thai-Cambodian border. Irrigation systems with dams, canals, sluices and water pumps were critical needs. With several rivers in the area, the potential existed for the creation of water reservoirs.

In 1996 the UNDP/CARERE supported Seila program established village development committees (VDCs) in the commune. Various village associations such as production groups, animal husbandry groups, and the small-scale credit groups were also formed. The production groups received rice seed, pigs, chickens, chemical fertilizer, and agricultural training. Seila also built schools, roads, and bridges in the commune. NGOs and development agencies had likewise provided assistance. Concern Worldwide supported the construction of roads, culverts, and wells, and the provision of water buffaloes. Reproductive and Child Health Alliance (RACHA) provided credit and training in birth spacing, immunization, and HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention. The World Food Programme (WFP) supported food-for-work projects in road construction.

In 2001, UNDP established the Partnership for Local Governance (PLG) project to support the decentralization process. In Phteas Rung PLG worked with the Seila District Facilitation Team to assist the Commune Council in project planning and implementation.

The Phteas Rung Commune Council had 11 members: eight from the Cambodia People's Party (CPP), two from the Funcinpec party, and one from the Sam Rainsy party. The commune chief was a CPP member. One of the 11 commune councilors was a woman. A commune clerk provided administrative support to the council.

Commune Administration

Changes since the Commune Council formation

Since the Commune Council election in February 2002, the commune councilors had noticed several differences in the administration of the commune. Before the election the commune authorities consisted of three persons who were all members of the majority party. The commune chief made all decisions himself and was accountable only to the higher party officials who had appointed him. The commune authorities had no clear job descriptions and

no clear plans. The results of their work were not transparent. After the election the Commune Council comprised 11 members who were from three different political parties. The councilors asserted that the commune chief now made decisions in discussions with the other council members. The commune councilors had specific job descriptions and individual responsibilities. Planning was done with the people's participation and the work of the Commune Council was transparent.

Civil society representatives from the various villages interviewed at the commune center supported the perception of the commune councilors. They stated that in the past commune authorities belonged to only the majority party and that decision-making was biased towards that party. As a result, commune officials exercised authority unfairly. For instance, they made decisions on development issues based on directives from higher government authorities, which often excluded the poor. After the formation of the Commune Council participation in decision-making increased. Since decisions were based on discussions that took place among the multiparty councilors, bias was reduced and authority was exercised more properly. Development planning was done with the participation of the people and priorities were based on need. For example, although the village in which the commune chief lived had requested a road, the road project was approved for another village in greater need. Previously, the commune chief could have made the decision alone in favor of his village.

Performance

Since its formation the Commune Council had received training from Seila and the Provincial Office for Local Administration (POLA). The training included sessions on decentralization, financial systems, the 5-year commune planning process, project design and implementation, bidding procedures, and investment planning. The council had asked for additional training related to their roles and responsibilities, and concerning legal aspects of land disputes and domestic violence. The Commune Council met every month and made decisions by a show of hands. The councilors maintained that they worked well together and based their decisions on the good of the people and not on the line of their political parties. An informal interview with one Funcinpec councilor did not contradict this, although clearly political ill will existed between the majority and minority parties.

The Commune Council declared that it provided reports to the district and provincial governors, to Seila and POLA, and to the village chiefs. The councilors maintained that the village chiefs disseminated the information they received about commune and national government directives to the people during village meetings. The Phteas Rung Commune Council mentioned nothing about passing or enacting commune laws or *deika*. The civil society representatives interviewed at the commune center said that the commune councilors never reported directly to the people about their activities. Rather, they channeled information through the VDCs. However, the councilors did attend meetings in the village, if invited.

Village viewpoints

To get a clearer idea of villager perceptions, the research team interviewed people in three geographically dispersed villages: Domnak Konseng, Bot Rumduol, and Koh Svay.

Generally, the groups of villagers interviewed in Domnak Konseng felt that not much had changed since the Commune Council election. Funding requests for village projects were still decided by higher authorities. None of the groups interviewed indicated that they had participated in planning sessions. Some villagers had participated in a food-for-work road construction project that, according to the village chief, was part of the commune plan. The VDC had attended meetings with the Commune Council to discuss the road construction

project but seldom attended meetings once the project was approved. At least two groups mentioned that the Commune Council had provided funds to construct buildings in the pagoda.

Many of the groups interviewed in Domnak Konseng maintained that the Commune Council never reported to the villagers so they did not know what the council was doing. One group said that they learned of the logging ban only when they were in the forest. Several groups wanted the Commune Council to address the problem of food shortages caused by drought. Some thought that the councilors should visit the people frequently. Respondents stated that several meetings were convened in the village during the campaign for the Commune Council election. But afterwards people rarely saw Commune Council members coming to the village to resolve problems. When faced with difficulties people normally sought assistance from the village chief. None of the commune councilors lived in the village.

Overall, the groups of villagers interviewed in But Romduol had not seen any changes in the situation before and after the Commune Council election. Most of the groups did not know what the Commune Council did. Some were not even aware that one commune councilor lived in the village. While a few of the groups interviewed had participated in the development of the commune plan at the pagoda, others had not. At the same time while some groups were aware that a road had been built as part of the commune plan, others were not informed about projects undertaken within the plan and had not made counterpart contributions in cash or in labor.

Almost all of the groups interviewed in But Romduol said that they had never seen or heard a report from the Commune Council. They knew nothing about orders or instructions that may have been issued by the council. Many looked to the Commune Council to address the problem of food shortages with the provision of rice seeds, fertilizers, and water pumps. In contrast to the majority of villagers interviewed, one focus group in But Romduol was extremely knowledgeable and appreciative of Seila's agricultural production activities and of WFP's food-for-work projects in road and bridge construction. This group was also more positive about the accomplishments of the Commune Council and the changes that had taken place under their administration.

Groups of villagers interviewed in Koh Svay perceived that changes had occurred since the Commune Council election. Some groups said that the commune chief now had more contact with development organizations and government institutions and that this resulted in the construction of roads and school buildings. Other groups reported that the councilors, as elected officials, acted with more integrity and had greater commitment to the security and welfare of the people. Still others mentioned that people now participated in development planning. Of note, the commune chief lived in Koh Svay village.

Some village groups interviewed in Koh Svay said that the Commune Council informed the people of their decisions in meetings. For example, in these meetings the people learned of the plan to reclaim the canal and the ban on logging. However, they learned little of the actual work of the Commune Council.

Planning and Implementing Activities

The planning process

The Phteas Rung Commune Council reported that they had followed the 11 steps in developing the commune plan. Seila and the District Facilitation Team facilitated the process, which included participatory needs assessments in the 13 commune villages. Priority

projects in the commune plan included school buildings, roads, bridges, dams, canals, water sluices, health education, prevention of HIV/AIDS, reduction of violence, vocational training for the poor, cash credit, in-kind credit (pigs, chickens and cattle), rice seeds and fruit trees, and support to small businesses. The write up of the plan was done by the Commune Council with support from Seila and POLA.

The Planning and Budgeting Committee helped to mobilize people's participation in the planning process. The committee was composed of the 13 commune village chiefs with the commune chief as head. The committee members received training on plan preparation and budget management from Seila. After conducting the planning meetings at the village level, the committee members integrated the village plans at the commune level. Once the commune plan was finalized the committee reportedly returned to the villages to inform the people of the outcome. They also sought to raise counterpart contributions from the villagers. Budgets for priority projects in the 5-year commune plan were allocated annually. Meanwhile, the committee sought financial support for projects from development organizations such as Concern Worldwide and WFP.

Implementing activities

In 2002, commune development projects were implemented in 11 Pteas Rung villages. In large measure, these were infrastructure projects such as water wells, roads, school and drainage pipes. A village was eligible to receive only one priority project per year. Funds were drawn from the Pursat provincial treasury to support Seila and other government projects. Projects in the plan financed by the WFP and Concern Worldwide were implemented directly by these organizations. In 2003 the commune received 41.25 million riels for development projects. Again these were mostly small infrastructure projects. Seila with support from PLG submitted the commune's request for a dam to the national government since it was beyond the scope of the provincial budget.

Once the priority projects were decided upon, the District Facilitation Team helped to facilitate the bidding process with contractors pre-approved by the provincial authorities. Seila staff also provided technical assistance to ensure that the construction projects were completed to standard. Budget allocations were not strictly followed and funds were often shifted from one project to another. Raising the required counterpart contributions from villagers was at times also difficult. While subcommittees were formed to maintain the projects implemented, funds were not budgeted for maintenance. NGOs and development agencies monitored their own projects.

Most respondents interviewed reported that local communities had benefited from the implemented projects. Transportation fees had been reduced on the roads built and market activity had increased. New schools had benefited villages with dilapidated school buildings. The construction of wells had benefited households who had access to them. While not all commune villages, or residents within these villages, benefited equally the projects had made a contribution to commune development.

Partnerships Between Commune Council and Civil Society

Relationships with village organizations

The relationship of the Phteas Rung Commune Council with village associations was still weak. This was partly due to the fact that the council worked primarily through the village chiefs and seldom visited the villages. In large part, the relationship of the Commune Council to village groups and ordinary villagers was very similar to that of the former commune authorities. Most villagers saw the Commune Council as a distant entity, albeit one that was

now more involved in building infrastructure projects. While the commune council invited the VDC members to attend planning meetings and relied upon them to raise counterpart funding, the councilors regarded them more as intermediaries than as true partners. Villagers were largely involved at the end of the process, when asked to contribute to projects decided upon from above. To date, the Phteas Rung Commune Council had not exerted a major effort to involve villagers in local governance or in development planning and implementation.

Relationships with NGOs

The Commune Council sought assistance from NGOs to implement commune projects and similarly coordinated with NGOs to ensure that there would be no overlaps in project activities. However, while good cooperation and coordination existed between the two entities, real partnerships had yet to emerge. Project financing, implementation, and monitoring by the Commune Council and NGOs were done in parallel. By contrast, the Commune Council clearly had strong relationships with the Seila program, which received support from the PLG. Importantly, Seila had not only provided technical support to planning and implementation activities, it also had established the VDCs and contributed considerable resources to agricultural development and small infrastructure projects. The strong presence of the Seila program in the commune meant that NGO projects and influence were of less consequence. However as a government program implemented by government staff, Seila was not well equipped to develop civil society interests among village associations nor to promote partnerships with NGOs working in the commune.

Relationships with National Government and Political Parties

The relationship of the Phteas Rung Commune Council with the district and provincial governments was strong. This was due in large measure to the Seila program, which had provided development assistance to the commune since 1996 and technical support to the Commune Council since its formation in 2002. The UNDP/CAREERE project had supported Seila from 1996 to 2001 and the UNDP/PLG project had supported Seila since 2001.

The Commune Council included members from the three major political parties although the CPP was dominant. By all accounts, the commune councilors had tried to rise above party differences to serve the interest of the people. Nonetheless, struggles among the various parties to increase their power and influence had created resentment among the councilors and limited their ability to work together.

**Metoeck Commune
Bakan District
Pursat Province**

**Selected and Supported by
Concern Worldwide**

Background

Metoeck commune was one of 10 communes in Bakan district in Pursat province. Metoeck was comprised of 15 villages with a total 2,446 households. Three of the 15 villages were located along Lake Tonle Sap and were inundated during several months of the year. The large majority of commune households were rice farmers. Households also earned from fishing, cash crop cultivation, and small trade. Over the past five years Metoeck had suffered a cycle of droughts, floods, and droughts. This had resulted in increased migrant work to Thailand and the Thai-Cambodian border. Young women had also migrated to Phnom Penh to find jobs in the garment factories. Migrants had returned to their villages with illnesses such as malaria and AIDS.

Concern Worldwide started community development activities in Metoeck commune in 1999. The organization had been involved in capacity building for rural development and, more recently, in providing support to the decentralization process. Concern provided training to the village development committees (VDCs) in community development and project management in support of activities such as rice banks, pig banks, and cow banks. Concern likewise provided training to the commune councilors in good governance and development programming.

The Metoeck Commune Council had nine members: six from the Cambodia People's Party (CPP), two from the Funcinpec Party, and one from the Sam Rainsy Party. The commune chief was a CPP member, the first deputy a Funcinpec member, and the second deputy a Sam Rainsy member. All of the commune councilors were men.

Commune Administration

Changes since the Commune Council formation

According to the commune councilors considerable changes had taken place since the Commune Council election. Previously the appointed commune chief made decisions by himself based on central government directives. Now the elected Commune Council, composed of nine members from three political parties, discussed issues before decisions were made. Similarly, the roles and responsibilities of the Commune Council were now defined and the specific tasks of each councilor clearly delineated. The councilors likewise maintained that the use of development funds was transparent since the money was kept and released through the provincial treasury.

Civil society representatives interviewed at the commune center likewise noticed changes in commune administration. Before the formation of the council they said, the commune chief

had responsibility for everything and, as a result, transactions and information dissemination were slow. The previous administration had no organizational structure, no planning activities, and implemented no development projects. Now that the Commune Council consisted of nine members, work was done faster and the sharing of information was more timely. Moreover, an organizational structure was in place and people participated in development planning and implementation. Nevertheless, instances of bias and discrimination based on political affiliations persisted.

Concern staff recognized that changes had taken place in the administrative structure with more members on the council and a greater delegation of power among them. Similarly, commune councilors represented various political parties and decisions were made after discussions and consultations. Despite these gains, the Concern staff reported that a large amount of the council's work still revolved around the interests of the political parties. Concern workers said that the councilors were more accountable to their political parties than to the people who elected them. Concern also felt that the capacity of the commune councilors was limited particularly in the area of development programming. Of note, the district governor of Bakan also noted that the capacity of the Metoek commune council was weak.

Performance

Concern and Seila had cooperated to provide various training courses to the commune councilors on topics such as decentralization management, financial system management, development concepts, and 5-year planning and budgeting. The commune councilors were thankful for this training and requested more sessions to build their capacities in specific roles and responsibilities.

The Commune Council met together once a month and reported on their assigned tasks. The commune clerk took minutes of the meetings. The commune councilors also maintained that they attended village meetings regularly to listen to the concerns of the village chiefs and villagers. The commune councilors acknowledged that initially party differences made it difficult for them to work together. However, the situation they said had gradually improved. This was partly due to the training they had received and partly due to the personal relationships they had maintained since their childhood. Disagreements were resolved by a simple majority vote, which was normally won by the CPP representatives since they had more members on the council.

Since its formation, the Commune Council in Metoek had passed two commune regulations or *deika* related to commune problems. One regulation prohibited electrofishing and the other prohibited gambling. However, neither of these bans was strictly enforced since they lacked support from higher officials and the police. The commune chief reported regularly to the district governor during monthly meetings of the commune chiefs and district department heads held at the district center. At these meetings the commune chief could request the district governor for assistance in solving commune problems. The Commune Council disseminated information to the villagers through the VDC and village chiefs.

Village viewpoints

To get a clearer idea of villager perceptions, the research team talked to people in three geographically dispersed villages: Metoek, Kdat, and O'Preal.

In general, the village groups interviewed informally in Metoek were disappointed with the performance of the Commune Council. Villagers complained that the councilors rarely visited the village and when they did they never smiled. Residents likewise maintained that

the councilors did not work well together and seldom reported to the villagers about what they did. Violators of the electrofishing ban were not punished including relatives of the commune councilors. At the same time, the village groups acknowledged that people had participated in the planning meeting and later in the food-for-work village road construction project supported by the World Food Programme (WFP). As a result of the road, villagers were able to travel and transport their products more easily. More children were also able to go to school. The village groups generally expressed the opinion that it was the outside development agencies such as Concern, Seila, and WFP which were responsible for the development projects and not the Commune Council.

Overall, the village groups interviewed in Kdat reported that the commune councilors were very partisan. As a result the councilors were always in disagreement and little was accomplished. The village groups wanted the commune councilors to spend more time with the people so that they could better understand the problems the villagers faced. The commune councilors rarely reported to the people even though the commune office was nearby Kdat village. When the councilors did report it was usually through the village chief. Several respondents in the village groups interviewed had attended the planning meeting with the Commune Council, the village chief, the VDC, and the NGOs, although they were not in agreement with the priorities that had been decided upon. Most of the village groups reported that a road and a school had been constructed in the village but it was unclear to them whether these infrastructure projects were financed through the commune plan or funded separately by NGOs.

The village groups interviewed in O'Preal generally observed that the Commune Council candidates visited often during the campaign but rarely after they were elected. Some groups said that it was difficult to get the councilors to work without offering them money. Most groups felt that it was the NGOs such as Concern and CARE, which were responsible and committed to the village's development. As a result of the natural disasters that had affected the village, many households in O'Preal suffered serious food shortages with household members temporarily migrating out of the village to Thailand or Phnom Penh to earn money for their families. Facing these difficulties rice bank and credit projects in the village faltered. Nonetheless, a large number of villagers participated in the planning meeting organized by Seila and most households contributed to the road repair and water canal digging projects that followed. The Commune Council relied on support from the village chief, the VDC, and Concern to mobilize villager participation in the road repair and canal digging projects.

Planning and Implementing Activities

The planning process

The Metoek Commune Council with the participation other members of the Planning and Budgeting Committee produced the 5-year Commune Development Plan. The Planning and Budgeting Committee comprised the nine Commune Council members plus two VDC representatives from each of the 15 villages totaling 39 committee members. The planning process began at the village level by conducting needs assessments and setting priorities. The VDC representatives, village chiefs, and Concern staff undertook much of this work. Concern staff maintained that 55 to 60 per cent of villagers participated in these assessments. The Planning and Budgeting Committee reviewed the village plans at the commune level with assistance from Concern and Seila staff. Village priorities were then consolidated into commune priorities and budgets were established. The resulting commune plan was presented at the District Integration Workshop to solicit funds beyond those provided by the government. Concern normally agreed to fund activities in the plan such as road

rehabilitation projects, which were consistent with their own objectives. The Commune Council indicated that the funding received from Concern was substantial. If the council had to rely solely on the commune fund received from the government, it would not be able to implement most of the commune plan.

Implementing activities

The Commune Council received about 41 million riels per year for development activities. The commune fund was kept at the provincial treasury. The Commune Council also received a budget for administrative expenses. This money was also kept at the provincial treasury in a separate account.

The commune councilors acknowledged that they had encountered difficulties in encouraging people to participate in the development projects due to the severe food shortages suffered in the commune. The Commune Council maintained that most people preferred to participate in food-for-work projects such as road repair and canal deepening. In 2003 the Commune Council had worked primarily with Concern and Seila to build roads and irrigation canals. The Commune Council likewise looked to Concern and Seila to provide assistance to monitor the projects. Council members and civil society representatives interviewed at the commune center were in agreement that the better off received the most benefit from the road construction projects.

The Commune Council reported that the five villages in Concern's catchment area received the most assistance. The District Facilitation Team supported this observation. This meant that two-thirds of the villages in the commune had received notably less assistance under the Commune Development Plan although these villages had participated in the planning sessions. Concern preferred to fund and implement projects jointly with the Commune Council. Since Concern perceived the capacities of the commune councilors to be limited, the NGO was reluctant to provide funds to the council to manage projects on its own. At the same time, the Commune Council adjusted the commune plan to fit Concern's interests to ensure that projects would be funded.

Partnerships Between Commune Council and Civil Society

Relationships with village organizations

The Metoek Commune Council relied primarily on the village chiefs to disseminate information related to commune administration. However, with respect to development planning and implementation the council worked closely with the VDCs. Of note, the Planning and Budgeting Committee included two VDC members from each of the 15 commune villages and these representatives were actively involved in the planning process. The Commune Council likewise relied on the VDCs to mobilize villager participation in the implementation of commune development projects. The involvement of commune authorities in development work had provided opportunities for the Commune Council and civil society associations to work more closely together and clearly increased collaboration and coordination had taken place. But despite this convergence of mutual interests, real partnerships had yet to emerge. Indeed, the VDCs and village associations were more actively engaged with Concern and Seila than they were with the Commune Council.

Relationships with NGOs

The Metoek Commune Council noted that while other NGOs simply informed them of their activities in the commune, Concern cooperated and coordinated with them closely to develop and implement the Commune Development Plan. Certainly, the Commune Council profited much from Concern's active involvement in the decentralization process. And to its credit

Concern took real steps to incorporate its Capacity Building for Rural Development (CBRD) program into the framework of the Commune Development Plan. At the same time Concern's desire to achieve its own organizational objectives, its need to monitor the funds that it disperses, and its guarded assessment of commune council capabilities had skewed the direction of the commune development activities into projects and areas that it had prioritized. To this point, the Commune Council's relationship with Concern was one of strategic alliance more than one of partnership.

Relationships with National Government and Political Parties

The commune chief reported regularly to the district governor and department heads about the situation in the commune and the work of the Commune Council. The commune councilors also coordinated closely with the Seila program and the District Facilitation Team.

Within the Metoek Commune Council party affiliations generally inhibited the councilors from accomplishing more than they did. While the council members conceded that they had major disagreement among them, they felt that their working relationships were improving. This was not the perception of villagers, of civil society representatives, and of the Concern staff. These groups narrated that the councilors from all three parties keep their party affiliations paramount and looked for ways to improve the standing of their parties within the commune. As a result the Commune Council had yet to convince the commune residents that they were working in the interest of the people and that their approach to commune administration was any different than that of the previous commune authorities.

Appendix 6 **Participant Researchers**

Huy Komnith	American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)
Nop Sarin Srey Roth	Cambodian Women's Crisis Centre (CWCC)
Kim Morokath	Dan Church Aid (DCA)
Keo Chenda	Enfants et Developpement (E&D)
Bun Sophat	Food for the Hungry International (FHI)
Seng Tinekor	Food for the Hungry International (FHI)
Um Phor	Food for the Hungry International (FHI)
Ea Dy	Family Health Promotion (FHP)
Hun Leakhena	Krom Akphiwat Phum (KAWP)
Yim Nimola	Khmer Women's Voice Centre (KWVC)
Oum Ravy	Khmer Women's Voice Centre (KWVC)
Muth Sokunny	Khmer Youth Association (KYA)
Kol Leakhana	NGO Forum
Heng Sokha	Non Timber Forest Products (NTFP)
In Sopheap	Sor Sor Troung (SST)
Chet Charya	Star Kampuchea
Ea Tharady	Star Kampuchea
Tou Tony	Vicheasthan Bandosbondal Neakropkrong Kangea Aphivath (VBNK)
Pen Vuthy	Vicheasthan Bandosbondal Neakropkrong Kangea Aphivath (VBNK)
Hen Heang	World Vision Cambodia (WVC)
Ly Khom	World Vision Cambodia (WVC)

ADI Team Researchers

Oeur Il	Cooperation Committee for Cambodia/ ADI Project
Seng Savuth	Cooperation Committee for Cambodia/ ADI Project
Ang Sopha	Cooperation Committee for Cambodia/ ADI Project
Hor Sakphea	Cooperation Committee for Cambodia/ ADI Project
John McAndrew	Cooperation Committee for Cambodia/ ADI Project