OXFAM-MONASH PARTNERSHIP: ACCOUNTABILITY SERIES II

UNDERSTANDINGS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

The case studies considered in this series of reports show that understandings of accountability held by members of local communities are often very different to those of the government authorities and NGOs whose decisions affect them. Yet such differences need not impede opportunities for developing meaningful shared accountability practices. Even where the meaning and value of such practices is understood differently by different participants, such values often overlap in significant ways, and the practice of working together can further bridge areas of difference. In this sense, common understandings of accountability may sometimes be best fostered through joint participation in shared practice, rather than by simply "talking" about misunderstandings or disagreements.

INTRODUCTION

For many organisations seeking to promote development in Cambodia, fostering accountability is a central goal. Yet between non-government organisations (NGOs), local communities and government authorities there is no single, shared understanding of what accountability means. This issue is made more challenging by the fact that there is no obvious translation of the word into Khmer. The phrase kaknaney-pheap which translates literally as kaknaney (account) and pheap (ability) is not widely used, especially at community level. Even where it is used, it often refers to the narrow idea of financial accounting.[1]

The Oxfam-Monash research project revealed the difficulties of communicating about accountability in a context where for many participants there were few concrete reference points for accountability, either in words or personal experience. For some participants, such as those who were working with or closely connected to NGOs, ideas about the responsibility

and responsiveness of decision makers could be discussed explicitly using language of accountability. Yet this study indicated that for many participants, these ideas were discussed with reference to a wider family of overlapping concepts—relating in particular to responsible leadership, participation, and rights.

A conceptual focus on responsible leadership, participation, and rights—as locally resonant elements of accountability—emerged organically from our research process. All three concepts were identified early on in the study as important ideas that many participants associated with accountability; we therefore incorporated interview questions about these concepts systematically into our research design. Through asking about these related concepts, it was possible to build a picture of participants' beliefs and experiences surrounding the concept of "accountability". Subsequent analysis of interview data then enabled us to refine and disaggregate our analysis of the different versions of these concepts that shaped people's thinking around accountability in different contexts.

The study revealed people's understandings of accountability to be shaped in important ways by what participants had heard, or talked about. For example, in communities where sustained programs of NGO-led workshops or trainings had been carried out, leaders or community members were more likely to raise ideas

of "participation" or "rights" in interviews. In contrast, in more isolated communities participants often drew more on pre-existing notions of virtuous leadership.

Yet this study also revealed that the realities of how political power was exercised coloured the way that people understood and communicated about these terms. There was a dynamic relationship between, on one hand, people's ideals surrounding accountability, and on the other hand, their actual experience, both positive and negative, of how power was exercised in their village, or government offices, or elsewhere. For example, while several community members used the concept of "rights" to express their expectations about relationships with political leaders, others expressed the view that rights had little relevance to their everyday experiences and the perceived injustices they faced. Some companies and local authorities were often seen to act with less regard for these rights: "If they want us to survive, we'll survive. If they want us to die, we'll die", concluded one participant. Such stark assessments of the political practices that people experience on a day to day basis necessarily influence the ways in which "rights" are understood.

This paper now turns to the wider family of concepts related to accountability—exploring in turn responsible leadership, participation and rights.

> "IF SOMEONE IN THE VILLAGE COMMITS ANY MISTAKE, THE GOOD LEADER SHOULD FORGIVE HIM AND FOSTER SOLIDARITY AS WELL AS COOPERATION SO AS TO WORK WITH EACH OTHER. THIS IS CALLED A GOOD LEADER...IF WE ARE THOUGHTFUL AND REASONABLE, SO THE OTHERS WILL TREAT US HIGHLY"

RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP

Amongst community members in the Boeung Kak, Lower Sesan and Oxfam Integrated Community Development case studies, discussions about responsible leadership commonly centred on virtues of wisdom, honesty (especially with money), respect for social rules, and capacity to deliver results. Responding to questions about what kinds of leaders are supported, and which are not, one male villager in Lower Sesan responded, "If they [leaders] are kind, they would support them".[2] One traditional leader in a village in Stung Treng suggested that "if

someone in the village commits any mistake, the good leader should forgive him and foster solidarity as well as cooperation so as to work with each other. This is called a good leader…If we are thoughtful and reasonable, so the others will treat us highly" .[3] Invoking similar ideas about the desirable personal virtues of a responsible leader, a traditional leader of a village in Kratie told us that a good leader should exhibit qualities of "good behaviour, [be] polite, honest, and help other people in the case they are in trouble".[4]

Leadership was also often described in personal and relational terms. A woman from a village in Lower Sesan said that the "village chief is like a parent",[5] while a man who had relocated from Boeung Kak lake suggested that the authorities' "role is like a father, and we like their children".[6] Like a good parent, the community leader was commonly expected to solve problems that community members brought to them. Accordingly, going to the village leader was often seen to be the "correct" approach when faced with difficult issues. "If you have any problem, go to the village chief and the village chief will resolve it", concluded one resident from Lower Sesan.[7]

The expectations commonly placed on leaders to protect and solve problems for community members were clearly illustrated in a story told by one man from a village in Lower Sesan. He talked about how a commune chief was responsive to a personal issue he had experienced in dealing with a company. "While I took the elders to see the new land, the company tried to chase me out", he said. "I phoned the commune chief and the commune chief contacted the provincial authorities. And the authorities came down right away to help me".[8] In this way, notions of "father-like" leadership were portrayed as directly relevant to community protection and problem-solving.

These prominent understandings of the virtues of leadership were also often repeated in interviews with local authorities themselves—reflecting a notion of paternal responsibility of leaders to citizens. A male commune leader in Lower Sesan said, "[If] the village calls me to help resolve something, I will drive my motorbike there immediately".[9] Meanwhile, another male commune leader in the Oxfam integrated community development project said, "the word authority is similar to father. So, no matter what we do, we have to help…If we don't solve for them, they do not respect us".[10] In a "father-like" way these local authorities expressed a responsibility to their communities for solving problems.

Crucially though, in accounts provided by community members in the cases we examined, these understandings of "father-like" leadership were not fixed in accordance with established social conventions. Rather, they were often also coloured by participants' own everyday experiences of leadership practices, and there were some examples where community members felt that local leaders or local authorities had failed to live up to expectations. Such feelings were particularly common amongst community members who had been negatively affected by development projects. One female community leader who had been forced to relocate away from Boeung Kak described her loss of confidence in the local authorities: "It is very painful, because I thought that the government were like my father and mother".[11] The "painful" dissonance between the ideals of virtuous leadership and the perceived failures of leaders in her everyday experience meant that her understanding of responsible leadership was challenged.

While rarely referring to "accountability" directly, for community members and local authorities there was often a prominent shared ideal of the role of leaders in protecting communities and solving their problems.

PARTICIPATION

Participation—in the sense of including affected people in decision-making processes—is another concept that many people interviewed for this study regarded as closely related to accountability. Participation of affected people can be incorporated into decision-making processes at the community level, in an everyday and direct way, or at higher levels of government decision-making in a more episodic, issue-specific manner.

NGOs, local government authorities and community members all placed significant emphasis on the concept of participation, though different people viewed it in different ways. For some, the concept implied an emphasis on voice and connection to national level decision making processes; others articulated a locally-oriented understanding of participation as authorities and citizens simply "working together" to achieve development goals.

Local authorities and community members often emphasised the importance of participatory practices at the local (village or commune) level. Some described participation as informing and "bringing community members along" so that village activities could be more effectively implemented. For example, one local leader involved in Oxfam's Integrated Community Development program said that, "When we do something, we have to go through the citizens' opinion, so that we can do our work successfully".[12] Similarly, participation was sometimes framed by local authorities as "working together"—community members being informed of activities and then providing their own labour or money (for example for road construction).

Local authorities themselves often felt disconnected from higher-level decision-making and portrayed their role as simply a conduit of information from above. For example, a commune council member in from one province described the challenge of connecting community concerns to higher-level decision making. "It is hopeless to raise the issues", he said, "because the expected results will be negative which means that there is no solution, so issues continue to happen".[13] This perception of a lack of influence with higher-level government decision makers coloured their understanding of participation and reinforced a focus on the village or local level. It also brought a more pragmatic understanding of what participation itself entailed.

For NGOs seeking to foster accountability between citizens and the state in Cambodia, 'participation' was also commonly identified as an important means of strengthening the responsiveness of decision-makers to affected communities. Like local authorities, NGOs often emphasised the importance of support for representative village-based committees and communication of citizen views to government, as practical means of implementing principles of participation. In contrast, however, NGOs were more likely to emphasize the importance of a multi-scale approach to participation, highlighting the value of citizen voice and participation from local and commune levels through to the national level. For example, a manager in one NGO program, which was working on fisheries policy, stressed that accountability relied on connecting local level experiences and ideas of citizens to national-level policy-making.[14]

Overall, the concept of participation resonated in different ways with NGOs, local authorities, and community members—from an emphasis on voice and connection to national-level decision making processes, to a local focus on participation as authorities and citizens simply "working together" to achieve development goals.

Forest near Srekor village with a tree marked with the words 'This is my land'
Photo: Nicolas Axelrod/OxfamAUS

RIGHTS

"Rights" were also commonly understood as closely connected to the concept of accountability. Rights were particularly central to many NGO conceptions of accountability. In contrast, amongst community members rights were often understood to have little connection to their everyday experience of dealing with "powerful people".

For several NGOs, explicit links were made between accountability and rights, whereby accountability was understood as a means for people to claim and defend their rights. Equitable Cambodia, an NGO active in the Boeung Kak lake advocacy campaigns, has articulated its organisational mission as being: "to transform Cambodia's development model into one that respects, protects and progressively fulfils the human rights of the Cambodian people".[15] Amongst NGO workers rights were also often referred to in specific legal terms—in relation to particular land rights, housing rights, or natural resource rights. Different kinds of rights were emphasised by different NGOs, reflecting the different orientation of their work. For example Oxfam often focussed on gender rights or rights to citizen participation, while some NGOs involved with the Boeung Kak case stressed the importance of land or housing rights.

One NGO staff member expressed how an understanding of rights can make a difference in solving problems in communities, saying that "if [the community] understand clearly about their rights, they can unite together and express ideas through the protest, or go to protest in the provincial office, or go to someone who they think can solve the problem for them".[16] There was a common perception amongst NGO staff, and community members closely connected to NGOs, that greater understanding of rights amongst community members would be directly related to greater accountability of government authorities.

Meanwhile, amongst community members and local authorities involved in this study, understandings of "rights", and their perceived relevance to everyday life, varied considerably. For some, the word rights held little meaning at all. When asked about the right to be involved in decision-making related to the Boeung Kak case one female resident said, "I don't know any rights. I don't think of anything".[17] Such absence of concrete reference points for making sense of the word "rights" also seemed to characterise the practical experiences of some local authorities. An Oxfam staff member recounted a meeting with a provincial governor where it became clear that the governor did not understand the word "rights".[18]

While the word rights held little meaning for some community members (and local authorities), for others "rights" was explicitly connected to notions of good leadership. A woman who had relocated to Domnak Troyeung, the resettlement site, compared the new context with her previous experience of leadership in the Boeung Kak community. She said, "[Before] if we had any problem, like we were in need of something, we could tell [the village leader]. Here, we don't have any right, we don't have any right yet".[19]

Where rights were referred to explicitly by community members, they were often portrayed as having little relevance to peoples' everyday experience of perceived injustice. Another female community member who had been relocated from Boeung Kak said, "I understand I am a citizen and I have the right to speak out, but we don't forget that no one is stronger than a powerful person. If they want us to survive, we'll survive. If they want us to die, we'll die". This stark assessment reflects a common perception that companies or authorities involved with the Boeung Kak or other development project were "powerful" people who could act in whatever way they wanted. Rights were understood by this community member to have no relevance to the exercise of power by companies, or the authorities. Where the lived experience of community members diverged significantly from the ideal of decision-makers protecting and respecting their rights, this presented a barrier to community members adopting new understandings of accountability.

There were some significant contrasts between participants with regard to their expressed knowledge of what rights are. Views also differed regarding the perceived relevance of rights in solving community problems. Where NGO staff often expressed confidence in, for example, a "rights-based approach", for some community members and leaders, rights were understood to have little connection to their everyday experience of dealing with "powerful people". In this sense, it is often challenging for community members to relate to the rights-based ideas of accountability put forward by NGOs. While communities can hear about or discuss rights and accountability, their lived experience may or may not provide reference points for making sense of these concepts.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed considerable challenges in communicating about understandings of accountability in Cambodia amongst community members, local leaders and government authorities, and NGOs. Some research participants, especially those connected with NGOs, could explicitly talk about their understandings of "accountability". Yet for many other participants, where there were few linguistic or experiential reference points, the only way to explore notions of accountability was with reference to a family of overlapping concepts including responsible leadership, participation and rights. These concepts were communicated by participants in contrasting ways, coloured by their direct experiences, both negative and positive, of local decision-making practices.

This study affirmed the notion that NGO education activities relating directly to concepts such as accountability, participation, or rights can play a beneficial role in providing community members and authorities with new words and ideas about such concepts, as well as practical tools for applying these concepts to their lives to help them gain greater control of decisions that affect them. However, given the challenges in Cambodia surrounding understandings of accountability, this study has also highlighted the importance of everyday *practices* of accountability. New *understandings* of accountability are powerfully influenced by people's lived experiences of participating in decision making of different kinds. For example, our case study of Oxfam's Integrated Community Development work in Kratie and Stung Treng revealed widespread appreciation of the importance of accountability amongst community members as a result of people's participation in rice bank committees and other initiatives that mattered to them over the course of many years. Likewise, the Boeung Kak case showed how strong rights-based understandings of accountability had been consolidated not only through particular ways of talking with NGOs about accountability, but also as a result of sustained *experiences* of women's everyday participation in decision-making about how to run the campaign against their displacement, and their strong advocacy for greater responsiveness from government and its developed partners such as the World Bank.

Workable, shared understandings of accountability can also be created through community members, leaders, local government authorities, and NGOs simply carrying on their day to day commitments to engage in meaningful and principled forms of *action* together—whether to improve livelihoods or address a specific grievance. Common understandings of accountability can be grown through common practice.

ENDNOTES

1   Kim, S., & Ojendal, J. (2007).
    Where decentralisation meets democracy:
    Civil society, local government, and accountability in Cambodia.
    Cambodia Development Resource Institute, Phnom Penh.
2   Lower Sesan interview, March 2013.
3   Oxfam integrated community development case interview, May 2012.
4   Oxfam integrated community development case interview, May 2012.
5   Lower Sesan interview, March 2013.
6   Boeung Kak case interview, August 2012.
7   Lower Sesan case interview, March 2013.
8   Lower Sesan case interview, March 2013.
9   Lower Sesan case interview, March 2013.
10 Oxfam integrated community development case interview, May 2012.
11 Beoung Kak case interview, January 2013.
12 Oxfam integrated community development case interview, April 2012.
13 Oxfam integrated community development case Kratie mapping exercise, May 2012.
14 Oxfam integrated community development case interview, October 2013.
15 Boeung Kak case interview Aug 2012
16 Oxfam integrated community development case, interview May 2012
17 Boeung Kak case interview August 2013
18 Oxfam interview August 2013
19 Boeung Kak case interview August 2010

THE OXFAM–MONASH CAMBODIA COMMUNITY DRIVEN ACCOUNTABILITY PROJECT

Oxfam worked with Monash University on a 3-year research project in Cambodia, studying communities impacted by development projects, including large scale projects such as dams and urban infrastructure. The research team was hosted by Equitable Cambodia who provided valuable assistance. The research focussed on three case studies: communities around Boeung Kak lake in Phnom Penh, who are known for their activism to keep their homes and land in the face of a luxury urban development project; remote villages situated along the Mekong River in the provinces of Kratie and Stung Treng who were part of the Oxfam integrated community development project; and villages in Sesan district who faced imminent resettlement as the Lower Sesan 2 dam project moved ahead. There are four briefing papers in this series exploring different dimensions of accountability work in Cambodia: understandings of accountability; strategies and impact of attempts to foster and demand accountability; enabling and constraining factors for accountability work; and reflections on what explains differences in strategies and impact of accountability work across contexts. In these reports accountability refers to the responsiveness of decision makers—whether in government, companies, or the non-profit sector—to the voices of people affected by those decisions.

Research for these reports was concluded in late 2014 and the analysis and findings reflect the status of the case studies at this point in time.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Shelley Marshall is the Vice Chancellor's Senior Research Fellow at RMIT University, Australia. Much of her research focusses on the ways that vulnerable communities influence business activities that impact their lives, and gain redress if they suffer human rights harm. At the time of research, she was a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Business Law and Taxation at Monash University.

Dr Tamas Wells is a Research Fellow at the University of Melbourne. His research focusses on democracy and accountability in Southeast Asia, and particularly on the role of international aid. From 2006-12 he worked with aid organisations in Myanmar on governance and democracy programs.

Dr Kate Macdonald is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Melbourne, having held previous positions at the London School of Economics and Political Science, the Australian National University, and the University of Oxford. Her research focusses on transnational governance and accountability, with a particular focus on the social regulation of global business, and accountability in the international aid and development sector.

Oxfam-Monash Partnership

www.monash.edu/oxfam