OXFAM-MONASH PARTNERSHIP: ACCOUNTABILITY SERIES III

STRATEGIES OF ACCOUNTABILITY

While 'confrontational' and 'cooperative'/non-confrontational strategies for demanding accountability are often seen as opposites, our study shows that the reality is more complex. In the cases studied, different strategies were used at different times and contexts. Varying strategies are effective and suitable depending on the target or level of decision making within government, the level of resistance to responding to community grievances, as well as the level of danger and livelihood insecurity faced by community activists.

INTRODUCTION

This briefing paper focuses on different strategies toward fostering accountability in Cambodia and their impact. It reveals that in attempting to foster greater accountability at different levels of society and programs there are important tensions and trade-offs between different kinds of strategies—between a focus on participatory or advocacy approaches, between engaged and confrontational advocacy, between a focus on different levels of government, and regarding whether or not accountability work is embedded in wider development programs.

Overall, attempting to foster accountability in Cambodia is extremely challenging, irrespective of strategies adopted. Paper Three in this series considers constraining factors such as centralisation of government decision-making power and lack of civic freedoms in greater depth. While gaining tangible changes in the responsiveness of decision makers may be difficult, this does not imply that there cannot be significant benefits from NGOs and communities engaging in forms of accountability promotion such as advocacy activities or facilitation of local community participation. Communities can benefit from such work via greater knowledge and confidence, or external recognition for ongoing struggles. This paper begins by outlining different strategies for fostering accountability and then explores their impact. It shows that NGOs and communities can face difficult trade-offs in selecting between available strategies toward fostering accountability. All potential strategies imply different benefits, costs, and risks.

STRATEGIES FOR FOSTERING ACCOUNTABILITY

In the cases we studied, different strategies were oriented towards different aims. All approaches to fostering accountability draw on some form on basic models of community organising—most commonly through the formation of community-based committees. It might be said, then, that all had the aim of increasing participation in decision-making at the local level. Where the strategies differed was in the extent that NGOs and communities also attempted to link local-level activities to government decision-making at the commune, provincial or national level—whether related to project planning for Boeung Kak Lake, or decisions about fisheries policy in Stung Treng.

First, while many strategies were described as "rights-based approaches", there was a contrast between approaches emphasising community participation and those emphasising advocacy. For example, in the Oxfam integrated community development project the approach was primarily oriented toward fostering community voice and involvement in village and local government decision-making. In contrast, some NGOs and communities in the Boeung Kak and Lower Sesan cases were engaged in advocacy activities in order to resist particular decisions made by government or companies, for example by opposing harmful development projects or making claims regarding the terms of compensation and resettlement.

Accountability strategies of NGOs and communities also targeted different levels of decision-makers—often reflecting calculations about where political openings lay in the different cases. For some, accountability work was primarily focussed on the local level, with the aim of fostering a more responsive role for local or commune-level authorities. For others, the target of accountability work was at the national level. For example, the Boeung Kak lake advocacy campaign at times targeted the Prime Minister directly. Meanwhile, other accountability activities were directed at international decision makers. In the Boeung Kak campaign, appeals were made to UN Habitat, the World Bank, and the Chinese government and investors, with a view to pressuring the Cambodian government to change their plans for development of the lake.

Such distinctions often reflected the different aims of the projects. In the Oxfam integrated community development project, the aim was to promote sustainable livelihoods through more widespread participation in livelihood development projects by local communities and local government. Oxfam saw the heightened engagement of local government with communities as a realistic goal which would result in improvements for communities. In the cases of Boeung Kak and Lower Sesan, the aim of communities and NGOs was to influence higher levels of political authority where key decisions about the infrastructure or construction projects that were impacting citizens' lives were located.

Amongst those advocacy strategies aimed at higher levels of government there were also contrasting approaches. Communities and the NGOs supporting and advising them, at times took a confrontational approach—seeking to directly pressure the government through public forms of protest and claim-making. One NGO worker described this as "hot advocacy". At times this took place via formal legal procedures, for example by engaging the Cambodian courts about land claims or submitting a formal complaint to the World Bank Inspection Panel. It sometimes took the form of street protest or other non-violent resistance. At other times, communities and the NGOs that worked with them undertook advocacy directed at government or companies that adopted a more engaged approach—in which efforts to alter government decisions focused on direct and less publicly visible communication and negotiation between communities and government authorities. For example in relation to the Lower Sesan 2 dam, one NGO providing support to affected communities focussed exclusively on engaging with government staff in order to develop better compensation outcomes for communities.   These contrasting strategies often reflected differing analyses by NGOs and communities of political opportunities and blockages. For example, the strategies pursued by Boeung Kak community members became more confrontational over time after pursuing conventional lobbying and administrative processes failed.

WHAT WAS THE IMPACT OF DIFFERENT STRATEGIES FOR INFLUENCING THE ACCOUNTABILITY OF GOVERNMENT AND BUSINESS?

One overarching finding from this study is that fostering heightened accountability of government or business in Cambodia is extremely challenging and it will require considerable time and effort until improvements are seen. There were important examples in these cases of communities gaining significant concessions from government, for example the stopping of evictions and the granting of land concessions in Boeung Kak to a number of individual families. The visibility of the protests of Boeung Kak communities was intensified by widespread national media coverage and presence of international actors. Many have observed that this may have resulted in significant, yet difficult to measure, impact on perceptions of many ordinary people within Cambodia about the possibilities for standing up to economic and political power. Nonetheless, even in the Boeung Kak case, in which efforts by communities and their supporters to strengthen accountability generated exceptional levels of external pressure on the Cambodian government, serious accountability gaps have persisted, demonstrating the resilience of the government in the face of such forms of pressure. The concessions that were secured were extremely hard won, and we found little evidence of these mobilisations generating more widespread or sustained improvement in the responsiveness of decision makers. As discussed in Paper Three in this series, the considerable constraints that face NGOs and communities seeking to shift existing patterns of elite decision-making are linked to factors that are difficult for communities to influence or work around, such as centralisation of government decision making power, or use of repressive measures by government.

IMPACT ON HIGHER LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT OR COMPANIES

In examples where NGO and community accountability activities did impact government policy and decision-making in ways that tangibly improved the lives of communities, it was often after sustained negotiations or campaigning. And changes elicited rarely threatened the broader interests of elites in government or corporations. This was true regardless of whether relatively more engaged or confrontational strategies were used.

In Lower Sesan a commune council leader reported that through direct dialogue and negotiation with the company, communities had some success in gaining company recognition that they would lose ancestral burial grounds and therefore needed higher levels of compensation[1]. Meanwhile, the "hot advocacy" work in Boeung Kak contributed to tangible changes in government decision-making in relation to that development. Advocacy to the World Bank, and its eventual withdrawal of funding from Cambodia in August 2011, contributed—together with other sources of external pressure mobilized by the campaign—to a prime ministerial sub-decree a week later granting 12.44 hectares of residential land around Boeung Kak back to the residents. This example is described in more detail in Paper Four in this series.

Advocacy or campaign successes often came at enormous personal cost to community members and leaders. Many community members experienced livelihood vulnerability, made worse through spending significant amounts of time on advocacy efforts, and in some cases activists faced arrest or other adverse actions from authorities. Disagreements regarding choice of appropriate strategies for accountability work also sometimes led to tensions within NGO networks. For example in activities related to the Lower Sesan dam project, 'engaged' advocacy approaches—focussing on the direct negotiation of better compensation—were seen by some NGOs to be undermining the more confrontational public campaign to stop the construction of the dam itself.

IMPACT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES

There were some perceived shifts in the actions of local authorities, though different strategies brought contrasting changes.

In the Oxfam integrated community development project, which focussed on local participatory approaches and engagement with government counterparts, some local government staff reported having developed a wider understanding of community needs. For example, in the Oxfam program in Kratie, which used a participatory approach to fostering livelihoods, monitoring of fisheries, and the establishment of conservation areas allowed fishing communities to maintain their livelihoods. Commune council members in Kratie said that, due to increased understanding by district officials of community experience, there were now better services provided, for example in agriculture and maternal health.

At the time our research was conducted, community members reported greater engagement by local government staff in Kratie during the operation of the Oxfam project.

Meanwhile, for communities in the Boeung Kak Lake case—where confrontational forms of public advocacy were extensively used—there were also perceived changes in local government, though of a different kind. One participant suggested that where local government and companies had previously ignored them, now they received greater acknowledgement of their demands, even if this sometimes resulted in intimidating responses. The repressive tactics of government and corporations, especially from the Boeung Kak case, are outlined further in the Paper Two in this series.

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IMPACT OF ACCOUNTABILITY STRATEGIES ON COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND LEADERS

Sustained changes following campaigning around accountability were most significant with respect to the way that decisions were made within communities and in the behaviour of local leaders. These changes were often as a result of the community organising activities that were at the core of all strategies. The extent of these changes differed depending on the nature of the strategies observed. After a decade of engaging in various livelihood development committees such as rice banks and saving committees, community members involved in the Oxfam integrated community development project in Kratie reported being "braver when they work in a group", having more confidence, being more involved in committees, and "daring to express their ideas" in village meetings.

The sustained period of engagement by Oxfam had resulted in widespread community involvement and learning about participating in decision-making through committees. The group decision-making processes employed by activists in the Boeung Kak campaign also fostered greater confidence and a heightened expectation of accountability from government. A female activist in Boeung Kak said, "Before, I knew nothing. I am uneducated. My knowledge is zero. But today I have some knowledge, I can understand about society, what is wrong and what is right. We can understand".[2] In contrast, the advocacy strategies utilised in the Lower Sesan case deployed less widespread participation in decision making by community members. A small number of community representatives received training and gained confidence, but knowledge of government processes and advocacy methods was not as broadly shared throughout communities as in the other two cases.

Across the different cases, both participatory and advocacy strategies were also, at times, connected to new leadership opportunities for women. In the Oxfam case, due to gender norms about division of labour, women were more likely to be involved in, for example, rice bank committees. Meanwhile, in the Boeung Kak Lake case, it was overwhelmingly women who played a front line role in campaign activities. In some cases, there were strategic advantages to women's leadership of advocacy activities, especially protests. A female community leader in Boeung Kak explained, "the important thing is that when we go to protest we collect women to

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protest. We don't want men….If we allow men to attend the protest they will be in big danger, and will make it easy for the authority to charge men with any mistake. Men face more risks than women, so they can stay home".[3]

This is not to suggest that accountability work always had positive impacts on women's leadership. In some cases, gender norms remained a significant obstacle for women's engagement in decision-making. For example, ethnic minority women in Lower Sesan were far less likely to speak Khmer and were therefore more commonly excluded from negotiations, or meetings about accountability work. Further, while women were often more likely to be engaged in village committees in the Oxfam case, this did not necessarily translate into an increase in material decision-making power in the village.

For many of the community leaders in Boeung Kak, the recognition gained through internationally oriented advocacy activities was also seen to be significant. In a book called "Sharing Advocacy Experience"

the Boeung Kak Lake activist leaders list the achievements from their advocacy activities. Included in this list of achievements are international leadership and film awards, and presentations at international events. A quote from a female community leader in Boeung Kak demonstrated the pride gained from international recognition of their struggles, in this case from the World Bank. She said:

All the people in Boeung Kak area, they are really grateful to the World Bank…in Cambodia, the people who must care about us should be our government. But, for this, it's an outsider who cares about us instead, so we feel...proud of ourselves that we have struggled very hard until we have victory and even got the World Bank to pay attention to us.

This recognition may not have been a stated goal for community activists and their NGO supporters, yet it clearly became a powerful motivator amongst certain activist leaders and community members who had faced considerable sacrifices for their advocacy efforts. It should be noted however that this international recognition was also a source of tension within the Boeung Kak community. Some residents complained that while the extended campaign may have resulted in greater recognition for some individuals, this did little for the many other families who had suffered considerably for their involvement in the campaign.

CONCLUSION

NGOs and communities in Cambodia demanding accountability from government and business—and fostering greater participation in decision-making within communities—face significant trade-offs. Strategies all have different costs, benefits and risks: there is no 'ideal' strategy. Papers Two and Three in this series discuss the different contexts in which campaigns have taken place in more detail.

Major development projects—such as the Lower Sesan dam or Boeung Kak Lake project—may comprise compelling targets for NGOs and communities to deploy confrontational advocacy activities. And these activities can be crucial in making significant shifts to outcomes, for example, in facilitating compensation for people affected by development projects. But NGOs and communities also need to be clear that these strategies often result in significant personal sacrifices, and especially livelihood vulnerability, for individuals and families involved.

Accountability tactics focussed at the local level over a sustained period of time, such as in the Oxfam integrated community development program, may be beneficial in stimulating shifts in grassroots community participation or the responsiveness of local level government staff. Yet due to the centralised nature of government decision-making in Cambodia, community members may continue to have little influence over key policy decisions that affect their lives. Finally, while the recognition gained from internationally focussed strategies can be a powerful motivator for activists, as was demonstrated in the Boeung Kak case, it can also be a source of tension within communities.

These case examples highlight that in adopting different strategies to foster accountability—whether focussing on participatory or advocacy-oriented strategies, confrontational or engaged interactions with government, or targeting local or international levels of decision making—communities, with the help of NGOs, are necessarily making assessments about the potential benefits, costs, and risks. These trade-offs have programmatic dimensions, but importantly they also often have significant personal implications for those involved.

ENDNOTES

1   Lower Sesan case interview, March 2013.
2   Boeung Kak case interview, August 2012.
3   Boeung Kak case interview, August 2012.

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

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