

Communities, NGOs and Accountability

Briefing Paper 1: Strengthening Community Driven Accountability

The Community Driven Accountability Study

Oxfam has been working with Monash University on a 3 year research project in Cambodia, exploring how communities impacted by large-scale development projects, such as dams and urban infrastructure, understand accountability and its implementation, and how different stakeholders, including NGOs, influence and shape this process. The research, funded by the Oxfam-Monash partnership, has been conducted in close partnership between Monash academics, researchers and development and human rights practitioners from Oxfam Australia and Equitable Cambodia.

What do we mean by Community Driven Accountability?

Accountability is often seen as a problematic concept in Cambodia, and one that is not well understood. In our study we have conducted research with different local-level communities to try to understand their perceptions of accountability and their ability to influence, control and participate in decision-making about external development projects that are impacting on their villages. By being able to influence, control and participate in development processes, local communities should be able to “drive” accountability processes. They should be able to voice what their concerns are, what their needs are and what they want to happen. However, another important aspect of accountability is the responsiveness and answerability of the decision-makers and developers who are involved in these project developments. Understanding how successful communities have been in seeking accountability requires an understanding of what response they have, or have not, received from these more powerful groups.

The research examined three case studies of communities in different geographic locations in Cambodia, both rural and urban, and each affected by different projects or challenges to their way of life, and each with different levels and types of engagement with local and international NGOs. The case studies were:

- Two remote, rural villages situated along the Mekong in the provinces of Stung Treng and Kratie, which have been supported for many years by the Oxfam Australia Integrated Community Development project, but now face new challenges to their livelihoods if the proposed Mekong dams in Stung Treng and Sambor go ahead. The village populations comprise Khmer, Lao and Kuoy indigenous people who rely on rice and vegetable farming, animal raising and fishing for their livelihoods.
- The Boeung Kak lake community in Phnom Penh city. Well-known for their activism to keep their homes and land in the face of a luxury urban development project, the Boeung Kak residents comprise a range of families of different socio-economic status and wealth, including government workers, urban migrants, shop keepers, guest house owners, and members of the police and military. This case study also included interviews with some of the 2,000 families who had already moved out from the Boeung Kak lake area, taking either the financial compensation or a home at the resettlement site in Domnak Troyeung.
- Four villages in Sesan district in Stung Treng province which face imminent resettlement if the Lower Sesan 2 dam project moves ahead. The villages are remote and comprise Lao, Phnong and Khmer residents whose livelihoods revolve around rice farming, animal raising, fishing, logging and use of forest products. The situation regarding the Sesan dam is ongoing and rapidly changing, and our research reflects the situation at the time of the fieldwork in February and March 2013.

Community understandings of accountability and entitlement to influence

The research found that the communities studied are at different levels in terms of their understanding of “accountability” and of being active as citizens in participating and engaging in decision making, and ultimately in trying to influence the development projects that impact on them. Community understandings of accountability differ between communities and between different community members, and also across time as communities accumulate learning and experience and/or are impacted by projects that require actions beyond the traditional methods for decision making and problem solving in communities. While many people in Cambodia may not understand the word “accountability” or have a complete definition of what accountability means, the people interviewed during the study did express key ideas, such as transparency, participation, responsibility and responsiveness that relate to the overall meaning of accountability. The research interviewees also expressed different ideas regarding their “entitlement”, or right, to influence decisions about development projects that affect them. These community-level understandings and ideas are important for NGOs who work with communities on rights and advocacy to be aware of, so that support can be provided to fill gaps in knowledge and understanding and to develop approaches to addressing issues that the community will feel comfortable with.

The different understandings of accountability and entitlement found during the study can be divided simplistically into three levels:

- **Level 1: Reliance on authorities as representatives**

“The village chief is like our father. Why wouldn’t he help us?” Male villager Domnak Troyeung resettlement site.

Traditionally communities and individuals in Cambodia place a lot of trust in the representative authorities to solve problems on the behalf of the people. In all the research case studies community members spoke of the village chief and secondly, the commune chief, as the people they would go to when there is an issue or problem to solve. While some people noted that as they had voted for the authorities they felt they had some control over decisions, the reliance on local authorities tends to disempower people. This is sometimes expressed through the idea that the authorities have the right to participate and decide, whereas the “ordinary villagers” do not. It results in people being relatively passive rather than pro-active in terms of seeking information and solutions. The reliance on the local authorities as the people’s representative is particularly pronounced in context of addressing community fears about the external development projects which will impact on them. Unfortunately, even in the cases where local authorities do wish to support the people they often have little information about major development projects and little involvement in their planning and implementation.

- **Level 2: Understanding of the importance of key accountability concepts**

The research found that within the three case studies, people are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of concepts such as participation, transparency and responsibility, all of which relate to the meaning of accountability. Villagers who had been involved in projects as part of the Oxfam Integrated Community Development Program were aware of how their own participation and decision-making within the framework of the project had increased their own knowledge and confidence to speak out and influence decisions. *“There have been a lot of changes for me. For instance, during meetings I have become braver since I have experienced various training courses, so I have some understanding and can get my voice heard on any plan discussed.” Female savings group member, Stung Treng Province.*

Communities were also gaining more understanding about the need for transparency and the provision of information, and how information could enable people to make well-informed decisions. However,

people were often finding it difficult to get the information that they needed, or even to know what information it would be beneficial for them to have. For the communities impacted by external development projects the research found that people have awareness that there is somebody who is ultimately responsible for making the decisions about the projects that impact on their lives, but often it is problematic for communities to identify the range of responsible actors, their roles and the possible mechanisms for seeking negotiations and solutions. In addition, people often felt that if decisions were made at “higher levels”, they did not have a right or ability to try to influence those decisions. *“I am left speechless when they say that even if we disagree, they will build it no matter what because the government says so.” Male community representative, Sesan district.*

- **Level 3: Active participation and a desire to influence**

The communities and individuals interviewed during the research project who had the strongest understanding of accountability were those that had a clear idea of their right to be able to participate in decision making, particularly around large-scale development projects, and who were organizing and mobilizing with the objective to influence and gain a response from those in power. The residents remaining at Boeung Kak lake have, after almost 7 years of campaigning and protesting, an understanding of the right to information and dialogue about development projects, the rights of Cambodian citizens under the Cambodian law, and the obligation of the government to serve and be accountable to the citizens. The Boeung Kak people also understand the importance of strengthening the community voice through local level organization and solidarity. *“The important thing to do is to strengthen the community, make it become one, and set up a clear community structure, and explain to people to have the same aim. Once we have one united voice, we will be able to prepare a clear strategy and approach.” Male Boeung Kak representative.*

This more developed sense of accountability and the role of people to actively seek answers and solutions only emerged in Boeung Kak when the people began to suffer the negative impacts from the development projects and they began to receive support and training from NGOs. However, their stronger sense of accountability developed as a reactive response to their circumstances, rather than having been present in the community prior to the external development intervention. A key challenge for communities, networks and NGOs is to develop a greater awareness and understanding of the principles of accountability and the rights of people prior to communities being impacted by large-scale development.

What we have learned

By looking at the three different case studies and the rich responses from the research participants, it is possible to begin to draw some lessons learned from the experiences of their communities in order to help other communities better understand accountability and what options are open to them when faced by large scale development project that will impact on their livelihoods. These lessons can also help NGOs working with communities to learn about their rights and to better assist communities to assert their rights and seek redress from entities responsible for development in ways that are consistent with the wishes of communities.

- **Understanding that development should be about equitable development that benefits all rather than a few.** Projects that are impacting negatively on poorer communities are often portrayed by the government as “development” for the country, with the implication that people have to choose between the development or conservation (of the environment, of their way of life). Communities and individuals with a weaker sense of accountability tend to feel unable to challenge this, often at the risk of impoverishment of their own livelihoods. Stronger communities have a clearer understanding that development should benefit the country as a

whole, and that those who are impacted should be involved in the discussions and decisions around the development and ensure that their own livelihoods are not negatively impacted. It would benefit communities to be exposed to a more critical analysis of the development processes that are leading to an undermining of the resource base in many villagers in Cambodia.

- **Understanding the role of the authorities as duty-bearers.** Communities with a stronger sense of accountability understand that authorities have a specific role to play in terms of both representing their interests and being transparent and answerable for decisions they make. When people do not expect or demand transparency and accountability from authorities, there is less reason for the authorities to act in a responsible way. Communities need to have a better understanding of the role of local authorities and their accountability to communities.
- **Access to information.** The ability of an individual or a community to take action is closely linked to the amount of information they have access to. Lack of information fuels rumours and fears and constrains the community's capacity to analyze, anticipate and plan ahead. The more information a community has about a particular development project, for example, the key decision-makers involved, the time-frame of the project and the possible project impacts, the better the community will be able to plan and take action. NGOs can support communities by helping them to identify what information they need and where they might be able to obtain it.
- **Legal knowledge and rights awareness.** NGOs can also provide information to the communities on their rights within the laws of Cambodia. A perception of justice and understanding that they are acting within the laws of the country can build the confidence of the community to assert their demands vis-à-vis external and more powerful actors.
- **Familiarity with the government system.** Familiarity with the government system beyond the local level can help communities to understand how critical decisions are made within the government system and which actors are involved. Not knowing how the government system works can lead to inaction or frustration if petitions or complaints are sent to the wrong people.
- **Methods of communication and consultation.** The case studies demonstrated that often affected people are not consulted appropriately. Information is provided late, sporadically and verbally, with no written documentation for the community to keep for reference and to share with other villagers. Consultation needs to be conducted in the language the people are familiar and comfortable with and giving adequate time and space for the people to consider and respond. NGOs can support communities in demanding that communication and consultation between government, project developers and the community are carried out appropriately and in a non-intimidating environment. *"I have never asked. The ones who often ask questions are the ones who can speak Khmer."* Female village, Lao-Khmer ethnicity, Sesan district.
- **Attitudes towards and capacity for collective action.** Communities that understand the need for collective action and solidarity are often more able to seek accountability than communities that have not experienced the benefits of being organized. Communities who have local people or organizations representing their needs and interests and who are familiar in networking with other communities over shared issues are often in a stronger position to organize and demand accountability from external actors. Awareness that seeking accountability often takes time and commitment is important so that plans can be made for sharing responsibilities and ensuring household incomes.
- **Valuing different roles and perspectives.** Communities are not homogenous entities and comprise people of different ages, gender and interests. For communities wishing to seek accountability it is important that the views and opinions of as many of these different interest groups are heard and that efforts are made to clarify what the key demands of a community are. Men, women, elders and youth can also be mobilized as special interest groups to pass information among their peers or to raise the concerns and viewpoints of their particular groups.