

Chapter 15

Capacity, sustainability and accountability in the face of modern development

Lessons from Oxfam Australia's development model in Cambodia

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OVERVIEW

Oxfam Australia has worked in Cambodian villages for almost 20 years, delivering integrated community development that aimed to meet basic livelihood needs while encouraging community ownership and self-reliance. In the face of rapid economic development, this work could be undermined as communities are negatively impacted by economic concessions or major infrastructure projects. Based on qualitative research in two villages, this chapter considers how well the Oxfam Australia approach has assisted villagers to become engaged as citizens in shaping and defining their own development and demanding accountability from government officials.

Introduction

Oxfam Australia has a long history of engagement in Cambodia, beginning in 1982 with an emergency humanitarian response, and then moving to a longer-term approach, bringing integrated community development to some of the poorest communities living in remote areas in the northeast and east of Cambodia (Barter, 2012). In recent years, this development work has taken place in a rapidly changing environment as Cambodia, like much of Southeast Asia, embarks on economic development, with large-scale infrastructure projects and land and forest concessions which frequently threaten the livelihoods of rural communities.

This chapter considers the effectiveness and sustainability of the Oxfam Australia integrated community development (ICD) approach in Cambodia from the perspective of citizenship. As a result of the long-term community development work of Oxfam Australia in their communities, to what extent have the poor and marginalised villagers become engaged as citizens in terms of participating in decisions about their own development and being able to hold the government to account? To what extent might these communities be able to have their voices heard in the future on issues that will impact their livelihoods as a result of the rapid economic development? The chapter concludes that while Oxfam Australia has laid the foundations for active citizenship through increased participation in development processes and by facilitating links to the local authorities, less success has been achieved in supporting communities to actually claim their rights and to ensure that there is institutional and organisational responsiveness from the government, particularly concerning development projects that may impact them negatively.

Background and context

The Oxfam Australia development approach

Since 1993 Oxfam Australia has implemented an integrated community development (ICD) programme in Cambodia, an approach originally developed to address the basic needs of rural communities who had experienced years of conflict, trauma and displacement. The ICD approach integrated a range of development activities, recognising that communities required a diverse range of livelihood and social interventions to assist them to re-establish their lives (Barter, 2012). The ICD approach combined the construction of basic infrastructure, food security, health, clean water and sanitation projects together with capacity development and community organising support. The first ICD project was set up in Takeo province, close to Phnom Penh in 1993, at a time when civil society was weak and insecurity prevalent. As security improved, the programme expanded to remote areas in the northeast of the country, to Kratie province in 1995, Stung Treng in 1997, and finally to Mondolkiri in 2009. These areas had little access to government services, NGOs and livelihood opportunities (Barter, 2012).

The ICD programme adopted what Oxfam Australia refers to as a tripartite system of programme implementation, in which the projects and activities are

designed, developed and implemented by communities in partnership with Oxfam Australia and government counterparts at district level. Oxfam Australia believes that the approach has been beneficial in terms of facilitating interaction between the local authorities and communities, thereby strengthening community access to government services and decision-makers and enabling the local government to have an improved understanding of the needs of rural communities. It was also hoped that through this approach Oxfam Australia would be able to influence local government by promoting and modelling 'best practice' for development, for example ensuring transparency and accountability at all stages of the project design and implementation (Barter, 2012).

A bottom-up participatory approach was employed, with community members involved in identifying and explaining their specific needs through participatory rural appraisal (PRA) activities. Initial activities in the early years of programme implementation often included building schools and establishing health and literacy programmes. Oxfam Australia also facilitated the establishment of community committees to manage and oversee the development activities. Rice banks, buffalo banks, savings groups, livestock associations, community fisheries, village health support groups and women's self-help groups were established in many of the villages and local people were trained to manage and run the committees and project activities, encouraging community ownership and self-reliance, while building skills in project management and decision-making. Village development committees, part of the government structure in each village, were strengthened and supported to oversee the preparation and implementation of the village development plans.

Sustainability in the context of the ICD programme is founded on a desire for the activities to be set up in a way that will enable them to continue in the future beyond the time frame of the actual Oxfam Australia intervention (Oxfam Australia, 2009; Rounce, 2010; Crossroads to Development 2010). Developing a sense of ownership and self-governance of the activities by both the communities and government partners appears to be a key aspect of the strategy to achieve sustainability (Oxfam Australia, 2009; Rounce, 2010). Participatory approaches, capacity building, primarily through training and experiential project management and implementation, and the development of local committees and management systems have been fundamental to efforts to ensure sustainability in this regard (Rounce, 2011; Barter 2012). Latterly the concern for sustainability has taken on new dimensions as rapid, large-scale economic development has the potential to undermine years of work to improve livelihoods. In this context, Oxfam Australia is also considering how much their work has equipped poor communities to understand these threats and to advocate for their rights and needs.

Oxfam Australia is phasing out of its community development programme in Cambodia and moving to a regional programme on Mekong water governance. The ICD programme officially closed in mid-2012, although Oxfam Australia is continuing to monitor the situation in the target areas and will also involve some of the communities in the broader Mekong governance work.

The concept of citizenship in a changing environment

In recent years the focus of much participatory development has turned towards a concern for increasing the ability of poor and marginalised people to influence the decision-making processes that affect their lives (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2001; Gaventa, 2004). This shift to citizen engagement in policy and governance is very much in line with the adoption of a rights-based approach in development contexts, recasting participation as a right rather than simply an invitation to beneficiaries of development (Gaventa, 2004). While the original aim of the Oxfam Australia programme was to meet the immediate food security and livelihood needs of the communities and to provide access to essential services, over the years there has been an increasing focus on rights and building the skills, capacities and knowledge of the community members and leaders so that they have a better command of their own development.

Today the concept of citizenship is an important one for Oxfam Australia, which has a commitment to support poor and marginalised people to become active citizens and to hold their governments to account (Oxfam Australia, n.d.). By active citizenship, Oxfam refers to the rights and obligations that link individuals to the state (Clarke and Missingham, 2009). It implies that active citizens can use their rights to improve the quality of their life through involvement with the state agencies that are responsible for the provision of services. It refers to ordinary people developing self-confidence and becoming 'empowered', individually or as a group, so that they have the ability to negotiate and influence decisions and confront poverty and injustice (Clarke and Missingham, 2009).

The need for vulnerable people living in poverty to be able to claim their rights and to work to change the policies and practices of governments, corporations and international organisations and to hold them to account for their responsibilities is becoming increasingly important in Cambodia as economic development widens the gap between rich and poor, urban and rural. Over the last decade, Oxfam Australia's community development work has been taking place in a rapidly changing environment, in which communities are faced with major national and trans-boundary economic development projects encroaching on their land and way of life (Ransley *et al.*, 2008). Infrastructure projects, hydro-power and mining, logging and economic land concessions all have a high potential for serious negative impacts for some of the poorest communities, threatening the landscape and way of life for many of the people Oxfam Australia has been working with (Barter, 2012).

Rural communities are frequently not informed or consulted in the process of these developments and are disempowered through a lack of information about the projects and possible options for recourse. Rural families tend to focus on individual household livelihood needs and lack opportunities for sharing information within communities. Ethnicity, poor public education, illiteracy and a lack of access to media and decision-making structures often isolates them from any dialogue processes that may happen around these projects. Their

vulnerability is further increased by insecure tenure and control over the land, river and forest resources on which their livelihoods depend.

With the phasing out of the Oxfam ICD programme and the looming potential threats from economic development projects, Oxfam Australia was keen to review how much their programme had been effective in assisting communities to have their voices heard, particularly when confronted by major development projects that may impact negatively on their livelihoods. The following sections consider how the ICD programme, through its focus on participation and the tripartite approach, has encouraged active citizenship and improved the villagers' understanding of and ability to assert their basic rights.

The research project

The findings are drawn from empirical research that was conducted in April and May 2012 as part of a broader study undertaken under the Monash University-Oxfam Australia Partnership. The study aims to examine community understandings of and accessibility to accountability mechanisms in the context of infrastructure and development projects that are impacting on their lives and livelihoods. The study examines three case studies of communities in different geographic locations in Cambodia, each affected by different projects or challenges to their way of life and each with different levels of engagement with local and international NGOs. This chapter draws on findings from the first case study, focusing on two remote, rural villages in the northeast of Cambodia where Oxfam Australia has been working. While the study was not an evaluation of the Oxfam Australia ICD programme, the findings outlined in this chapter contribute to the reflections currently being conducted by Oxfam Australia following their long engagement in Cambodia.

The field research was conducted in Sre Kresaing village in Stung Treng province and in Kampong Roteh village in Kratie province. Sre Kresaing is situated along the Mekong river and Kampong Roteh is located on the Mekong island of Koh Tnoth. Both communities are poor and rely on the natural resources of the river for their livelihoods and cultural practices. The 120 families in Kampong Roteh are predominantly Khmer with some Kuoy indigenous people. The main livelihood activities are rice and vegetable farming, animal raising and fishing. The village will need to be re-located if the proposed Sambor dam goes ahead. Sre Kresaing village comprises a population of ethnic Khmer and Lao, with a total of 339 families. The main livelihood activities are rice and *chamkar*²⁷ farming, fish raising, small business and labouring. While the village will not be displaced by the proposed Lower Sesan II dam, there could be some substantial downstream impacts on fishery resources.

The research team comprised an expatriate research coordinator and two Cambodian research officers recruited specifically for the project. Four research assistants, seconded from local universities, also joined the team in the field. The

²⁷ *Chamkar* refers to cultivation of crops other than paddy rice.

research tools were developed collaboratively by the in-country research team and academic staff from Monash University in line with a broader set of questions guiding the overall study. Detailed semi-structured interviews were used to interview community members, committee members, government counterparts, local authorities and Oxfam Australia staff to ascertain their views on the Oxfam Australia activities, village and commune decision-making processes, dispute resolution, community mobilisation, interaction with the government, and any perspectives they had on the potential large-scale development projects. Key informants at community level were initially identified by both Oxfam Australia staff and community gatekeepers such as the village chief. While it is recognised that this perhaps introduced a certain amount of bias into the selection of informants, the research team developed criteria for the selection of participants to ensure that a broad-cross section of the community was reached. The criteria included demographics such as ethnicity, gender, age, income/wealth, source of livelihood, length of time in the community and physical location in the community. If identified informants were not available the team randomly selected other informants, either referred by existing informants or identified by the team during their stay in the village. Participatory mapping exercises such as time lines, venn diagrams and force field analysis, were facilitated with groups of five to six participants selected according to the criteria developed by the research team. All interviews and mapping exercises were conducted in Khmer language, with transcripts from the recorded interviews and field notes later being translated into English. Interviews were also conducted with Oxfam Australia staff in Phnom Penh, and a literature review of relevant reports and evaluations was carried out.

Investigation outcomes

Enhanced participation

The concept of participation is familiar in development discourse, and is increasingly being connected to citizenship and democratic governance. Participation is the first key step in citizenship, and citizen engagement can be linked positively to achieving development and democratic outcomes (Gaventa and Barrett, 2010). The core of the Oxfam Australia programme revolved around participatory techniques that enabled local communities to determine their development needs and to be involved in the actual implementation of the activities and monitoring of the results. People were organised around committees responsible for overseeing and implementing the activities. The involvement in the committees allowed for strengthened participation and agency, and by seeing themselves as actors, rather than simple, passive beneficiaries, there is evidence that both individuals and groups were better able to assert their citizenship and seek greater accountability within the framework of the project.

Many of the committee members interviewed spoke of how they had improved their own skills and obtained some level of individual empowerment through

their participation in the committees and development activities. During the interview process the research team found that committee members were confident to express their opinions and had a good knowledge about village meetings and development processes. Interviewees mentioned training that they had received ~~both~~ in technical skills and also in management, leadership, facilitation skills and report writing. It was often mentioned that their participation in the Oxfam activities and on the committees had helped them to increase their knowledge and confidence so that they felt they had more ability to speak out at meetings. A male village health worker explained, 'Yes I have changed myself. I dare to speak, educate and share ideas. Before I was so shy.' A female member of a village savings committee noted, '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.' The ability of women to speak out and be more involved in discussions was something that was also mentioned by local authorities and leaders. A traditional leader in Kratie said, 'In the past, when we asked the women, they knew nothing, but now they can answer quickly.'

Oxfam Australia staff members feel that community members have become more empowered through the activities. As one provincial staff member reflected, 'Normally they did not understand why it is important to make decisions and how important their opinion is. But as time goes by, I noticed they have more understanding and expressed more opinions on women's involvement, village development and communication ... Later they were prepared to be involved in the district council, or as deputy chief of the village and so on. As such they started to feel proud and understood their value.' It was found that several committee members from both the villages had been elected to take up positions in the local authorities or commune council, which was mainly attributed to their pro-activeness and decision-making ability in the committees.

As groups, the strengthening of community structures such as the village development committees and the establishment of the other sub-committees, provided people with the experience of how being organised can have an impact.²⁸ The organising of the committees provided people with the experience of electing representatives, receiving training on roles and responsibilities, and in preparing village development plans. The value of getting things done as part of a committee or group was expressed by many of the interviewees. The government officials recognised that the groups brought people together to help themselves, but also contributed to the ability of people to participate in decision-making. As one government official noted, 'They are braver when they work in a group. If they do not work in a group they dare not to express their ideas in a meeting.'

Another benefit of working in committees or groups that was noted by the interviewees was the fact that it allowed for the sharing and dissemination of information among the group members. The setting up of the committees also

²⁸ Personal communication with Oxfam Australia staff members, 24th September 2012.

created a space for allowing people to meet, to discuss and make decisions, something that had been limited before when households had remained relatively isolated from each other with little chance to meet to discuss issues. A community leader explained, 'When we are in groups we can understand a lot because we can gather the villagers to create a group to unite with each other and exchange ideas.'

While there is evidence that the participatory approach employed by Oxfam both empowered individuals and increased the dialogue and consultation between people in the village, participation also comes with its own issues of power (Nelson & Wright, 1995). Communities are not holistic entities but are comprised of individuals with differing ideas, needs, capacities and motivations. Citizen participation is not something that can be achieved universally and much depends on how citizens take up the opportunities presented and also the conditions under which the poorest and most marginalised are able to participate. As Gaventa and Valderrama (1999) point out, 'citizen participation is about power and its exercise by different social actors in the spaces created for the interaction between citizens and local authorities.' During the research it was noted that there was a clear difference in knowledge between those community members who held senior positions in the committees and those who were just members. This was also noticed by government staff, as one commented, 'Usually there are 15 members in each group, and there are only two to three members who are intelligent decision makers.' Villagers who were interviewed who were not members of committees had far less understanding of village development processes and also had less access to information. The research found that non-committee members, especially women, were more likely to give a summary, deferential answer, such as 'I don't know'. It appears that there was little transferral of skills, knowledge and information to non-committee members. If they knew about the development activities, they were more likely to list the tangible assets, such as buildings, latrines, water filters and buffalo, rather than building skills and community cohesion. As one respondent stated, 'Like I told you, I have no idea regarding what they are doing in this village. So far I have never been informed about any information from my village or commune chief.'

Certain villagers were members of several of the committees and had obviously gained a lot from the experience, both in terms of personal development and material benefits. However, other groups and individuals in the communities were excluded or absent from the activities, suggesting that there are still significant barriers to encouraging the engagement of less vocal and powerful members of communities. Interviewees speculated that this was perhaps due to lower levels of knowledge, a lack of literacy skills and a lack of time to participate. While Oxfam made every effort to work at times of the day and times of the year when workloads are lighter, participatory approaches are time consuming and for those struggling to earn a living on a day to day basis, the time to participate in meetings is limited. Many of the villagers who did not participate mentioned lack of time as the main constraint to their participation, and even those who were members of committees noted how it meant they were now always busy and had less time than before. Rounce (2011) also noted that the capacity of the poorest for

investment to join a group that required initial capital investment also tended to exclude them from participating.

Participation in relation to citizenship refers to the shift from the participation of 'beneficiaries' in projects to the more political and rights-based definitions of participation by citizens who become the 'makers and shapers' of their own development (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2001). While it seems clear that the participatory approach of Oxfam did help to empower people and build skills and confidence which they previously lacked, there is less evidence that they have been able to employ these skills to influence the broader decision-making and policy environment outside of projects. Participation in the Oxfam Australia ICD programme was around a frame of reference of development projects, such as rice banks, buffalo banks and savings groups. Thus it is often difficult for people to have the agency to make choices or influence decisions outside these frames of reference. Davis (2010) also found that the participation in the programme had not resulted in a broader conceptualisation of Oxfam Australia and its position in relation to the government and other local and international development agencies.

With low levels of education, rural villagers in particular often feel inferior to those in higher positions who are more educated and self confident. A local government official, when talking about the community perceptions of the impacts of large-scale development projects noted, 'They dare not talk about these issues in the face of high-rank officials. They just talk with their peers.' This does raise the question as to whether participatory engagement around projects is in itself enough to build the knowledge and agency required to challenge or participate in the decision-making around the larger, macro-level policy issues.

Linking citizens to the state

A key aspect or challenge of citizenship is linking ordinary people to the institutions, especially those of the state, that affect their lives. Often state institutions are remote and neither responsive nor accountable to the poor. Closing the distance between the state and the people and building relationships is an important goal to achieve. As Gaventa (2004) explains, 'as participatory approaches are scaled up from projects to policies, they inevitably enter the arena of government, and find that participation can become effective only as it engages with issues of institutional change.'

The Oxfam Australia projects helped to develop relationships between the community members and the local authorities charged with the task of working with the community. The government counterparts remained government employees but worked for up to 15 days per month as community facilitators and technical advisors. They were involved in the operational planning and delivery of projects and provided technical support to the various committees and activities. They also attended bi-monthly coordination meetings held in the villages.

The fact that local government officials worked on a regular basis in the villages meant that they were much more aware of the issues faced by the communities and could understand the practical needs of the local people. Several of the government counterpart staff had worked in the role for nearly 10 years and so had built up a comprehensive understanding of their areas of responsibility. Government officials interviewed during the course of the research stated that due to their knowledge of the field, they were able to pass on information to their department about the situation at local level. As one district official noted, 'Working with Oxfam Australia, I can visit villages and know the situation there, the situation in the village ... I can know more. In turn, in regard to work at the district office, I have learnt a lot, such as sharing information. For example, er ... the officials in the district office have no idea about the situation because they do not visit the villages.' The enhanced knowledge of local livelihoods also meant that they were able to reflect on the potential impacts of the large-scale hydropower projects. One official, noting fewer fish, extremes of weather and increased weed in the river commented, 'Thus I just wonder why they still carry out the dam project if there are so many impacts.'

However, the ability of the local district officials to raise concerns to higher levels appears questionable, and it seems there is a further gulf between the lower level district and provincial officials and central government. As one district staff member noted, 'We cannot change the project because it is the government project. Large projects are not easy to change like the small projects, ones which only spend only one or two million.' Another district administrator mentioned that there had been a meeting about a planned hydropower dam with more senior government officials, but because 'they had planned things already, they told us about the positive impacts more than the negative ones.' It was also apparent that the local authorities at commune and district level often had little information about the large scale development projects. A study by Kim and Öjendal (2007) also found that local authorities at commune and district level are often 'kept in the dark' by higher authorities and lack influence in the political hierarchy, which can result in a lack of responsiveness or willingness to take responsibility.

Because the Oxfam Australia staff worked closely with the communities and developed strong relationships of trust, the government counterparts were also accepted by the communities despite the fact that, due to the numerous regime changes of recent history, rural Cambodian villagers often have little trust or confidence in the local authorities (ANSA-EAP, 2010). However, the communities were often found not to differentiate between the Oxfam Australia staff and the government counterparts. While this indicates the level of trust that Oxfam was able to bring, it does also raise the question of the ability of the people to validly identify the government agents. Throughout the course of the project, some local government staff members were recruited as Oxfam staff, which further diffused the lines between government officials and NGO facilitators.

Many local communities in Cambodia have lacked any effective government services for many years and are used to international and local NGOs filling this gap. The research found that the communities did not see the activities as led by

the government at all, despite the involvement of the government counterparts. Instead, the activities were always referred to as part of the Oxfam Australia project. Davis (2010) had similar findings, and also found that despite the work of the government counterparts, the communities he interviewed said that they still mistrusted the government. This also leads us on to the question as to whether government counterparts perceived they were conducting government work, or whether they felt they were simply seconded to an NGO project, which could have implications for future sustainability and continuation of the work between the district level government and the communities. The research found that there was a lot of uncertainty on the behalf of the government officials as to how they would be able to continue the work in the future without the Oxfam Australia budget and support, a finding also reported by Rounce (2011). A member of the Department of Women's Affairs noted that future work would probably be done through their networks of focal points, but that it would not be as easy as doing the actual practical work and meeting people in person. Some counterparts even drew a distinction between the work of Oxfam and the way the government works, noting that while NGO work is coordinated, government work is directed from the top down. As one official explained, 'To be honest, if we work with the government, we will not observe directly without any support. This is the weakness of the government. So if we want to visit [the village] we may wait for the order from the upper level on how to do it ... the upper level orders to observe or visit, not coordinate, but order.'

Despite this, during the course of the project there have been some positive developments which suggest that, at least between the village and commune level, activities and coordination may continue to take place. The establishment of the commune councils in 2002, as part of the government programme for decentralisation, provided a local level governance unit which enabled the Oxfam Australia programme to link village development planning with local level government planning. In the two villages visited, the commune councils hold monthly meetings with the village authorities and committee members to provide for updates on activities. There were also signs of bottom-up linkages to the authorities, where members of the village development committees or other committees had moved up to take official positions as village leaders or within the commune council. As one commune council member explained, 'There were savings group leaders and they attended much training with Oxfam. Therefore they improved their awareness and dared to express their ideas in meetings. Seeing this, the commune chief knows that they are qualified and dared to express ideas. Finally they can work as village chief or commune council members.'

The programme has also tried to ensure that the village development plans are fed into the commune investment plans, thus ensuring that villagers are voicing their development needs and influencing the development plans of the commune. While Oxfam Australia staff are able to cite cases where this has been effectively achieved, there is still uncertainty as to how the local development planning process will continue once Oxfam Australia withdraws and there are less donor funds available.

Oxfam Australia hoped that by working closely with the local level authorities, best development practice could be shared and instilled. In its programme work, Oxfam Australia made a serious attempt to be transparent about its goals and practices and established two-way channels of communication around planning and implementation. Information shared with the communities and local government counterparts included project budgets, operational plans, time lines, labour requirements and the respective contributions of the communities, the counterparts and Oxfam Australia. As an Oxfam Australia staff member explained, 'We are open. Our project is open, written and presented to the villagers on which activity is approved to be implemented in the village and how much [the cost] of the activity.' Oxfam Australia staff believe this openness did reduce the risk of corruption.²⁹ Government counterparts were also aware of the need for transparency and accountability in the Oxfam programme and were able to explain the process: 'We need to tell people the amount of money that we received from Oxfam to carry out the project. We also need to tell them the amount of money that we give them for food, transportation and so on.' However, as yet there is no clear indication as to whether the government officials viewed these procedures as only relevant to the work with Oxfam Australia or whether they could see the applicability of them to their own work with the government.

Implications for the field

When the Oxfam Australia ICD programme began, Cambodia was emerging from more than 30 years of civil war and turmoil which had left the population traumatised and poor. The approach taken by Oxfam was initially a needs-based approach which continued throughout the life of the programme. However, overtime the programme began to introduce a stronger focus on rights and building the participants' skills, capacities and knowledge, so that they were better able to lead and shape their own development. The second approach reflects more the aspects of citizenship and theoretical debates regarding 'rights-based programming', which now form a central part of the Oxfam regional programme. However, how much did this combined approach of needs and rights enable the communities that Oxfam Australia worked with engage as active citizens around the large-scale development issues that concern them?

Oxfam Australia continued to keep the programme grounded in the livelihood needs of the communities. According to the Cambodia-based Oxfam staff, this was based on the premise that poor people cannot participate effectively or meaningfully if they are not meeting basic food needs.³⁰ The buffalo banks, rice banks, community fisheries and improved agricultural techniques all supported the aim to improve and stabilise livelihoods. Improved health care and literacy also created an enabling environment for people to be better able to participate. Evaluations of the Oxfam Australia programme show that food security in the target areas did improve (Rounce, 2011; Crossroads to Development, 2010).

²⁹ Email correspondence with Oxfam Australia staff 24th October 2012.

³⁰ Personal communication with Oxfam Australia staff 24th September 2012

SPARC³¹ (quoted in Cornwall and Gaventa, 2001), note that the poor will not be taken seriously if the level of engagement with the state is only confrontational or ideological. 'No doubt advocacy is important, but it must be rooted in the practical difficulties that the poor face daily: poverty, homelessness, lack of access to services, education and health.' The Oxfam Australia approach ensured that all activities were firmly rooted in dealing with the practical difficulties faced by the poor, rural communities with which they worked. The ICD projects also created spaces for citizens to exercise their voice and to make decisions about development projects to meet their needs. Livelihoods have improved and communities developed skills in technical areas of expertise, such as agriculture and health, and also in community organising and managing and running their own development committees. However, the speed of economic development in Cambodia has been extremely rapid and in many ways was counter to the development approach of Oxfam Australia, which invested in communities for a long period of time to allow for greater community ownership over activities, thus presenting a substantial challenge to the programme in terms of how to respond to the external pressures of economic development and 'skill up' the communities and facilitators in the time required.

From projects to issues

While Oxfam Australia set up good structures for committees around needs-based development activities, it appears that these may have constrained the ability to address broader issues outside of the immediate micro-level development projects. The programme focus was largely on the village projects, with the information flow being mainly on project issues and processes such as reporting, budgeting, implementation, and monitoring. In more recent years Oxfam Australia began to engage some of the community and committee leaders, particularly the community fisheries groups, and government counterparts in national-level workshops to talk about the macro-issues, such as the hydropower dams, but this engagement appears to have been intermittent and was not incorporated more broadly in to the programme. As one government official explained, they were involved in distributing leaflets about the hydropower dam construction and asking whether people agreed, and what they felt the impacts would be. 'After people put their signature, we collected the leaflets and sent to advocacy groups in Phnom Penh, but I do not know what the advocacy groups in Phnom Penh will do with the leaflets. We just disseminated and distributed the leaflets to the people.' Interviewees mentioned that they had attended workshops and training carried out by Oxfam in collaboration with other NGOs on the possible affected areas and were able to share the information with other villagers through the committees. However, there was less engagement and follow-up on the issues at a local level. In hindsight, Oxfam Australia believes more should have been done to facilitate increased dialogue between the people and the authorities on these macro-issues, and to support the development of advocacy

³¹ An association of slum dwellers in Bombay

plans and strategies to include within the village development plans, although this was never an explicit goal of the ICD programme.³² The communities would have benefited from more knowledge in terms of mobilising and organising to address issues beyond the project activities and in finding out how to access relevant information. Tools such as action research and exposure visits to other communities impacted by dams and mega-infrastructure could have increased awareness of potential impacts, initiated alliances and networks, and provided more of a context for the rights training provided by the programme.

Spaces of interaction

The Oxfam Australia programme worked closely with local level government and some modest gains were made in bringing the state closer to the citizens by collaborating with the counterparts from the district authorities and ensuring the integration of village development plans into commune level plans. However, while it seems that work with the government helped to develop the skills, capacities and understanding of individuals, there was less focus on influencing the government departments beyond the individuals in terms of work practice and accountability. Counterparts clearly increased their knowledge about the local areas and the potential negative impacts of large scale infrastructure, but at the bottom of the government hierarchy, they also had little ability to influence and thus were constrained in their responsiveness to issues outside of the project mandate. This also raises the question as to how effectively communities can demand accountability through the conventional, local government structures when it often appears that decision-making concerning large-scale national and trans-boundary economic development projects bypasses these levels of authority.

Despite this, increased citizen participation in government dialogue and processes and greater responsiveness of the state institutions to the people, could have been facilitated by focusing more attention on the interaction and spaces between the government and the people. As Gaventa (2004) argues, closing the gap between the citizens and the state requires working on both sides of the equation, 'going beyond 'civil society' or 'state-based' approaches, to focus on their intersection, through new forms of participation, responsiveness and accountability'. Of course, this also has to be considered within the political context of the country and in Cambodia at this present time the avenues for decision-making and participation remain extremely limited and there is little real decentralization of power. However, the Oxfam Australia programme could have engaged more with the local authorities at an institutional level and focused on the mechanisms and learning obtained from bringing the communities and the authorities together. Valuable lessons could be drawn from the initiatives where there was successful cooperation with and response from government departments. The community fisheries project, for example, did have some success in terms of establishing fishing zones and conservation areas and registering these with the support of the district department of fisheries. Analysing and documenting the

³² Email correspondence with Oxfam Australia staff 24th October 2012.

lessons learned on the processes and conditions that enable models based on local actions to be scaled up and supported through the broader policy mechanisms will in the future enable stronger cooperation between communities and local authorities and ensure that there is better institutional and organisational responsiveness from the government.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined at a broad level the integrated community development programme of Oxfam Australia in rural areas of Cambodia and has considered the extent to which the programme assisted the communities to become engaged as citizens in shaping and defining their own development and demanding accountability from government officials. It is clear that over the years Oxfam Australia has had a tangible impact on the communities in terms of improving food security and livelihood needs and in laying the foundations for active citizenship through participation in the development process and facilitating links to local authorities. However, there is less evidence from the research that the villagers of Kampong Roteh and Sre Kresaing are able to participate in dialogue around economic development projects which will likely impact quite severely on their livelihoods, nor that a level of engagement has been achieved with the local authorities, which could create new spaces for policy level dialogue between state actors and communities. Despite this, the analysis provides some clear indications of how development organizations can continue to work towards the goals of active citizenship by shifting beyond project based participation and dialogue to widen engagement with policy level issues and by focusing on enhancing the mechanisms and processes for interaction between state and citizens.

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