

1. *Country context. Since when engaged. Scope of the engagement? Changes and adjustments over time?*

Context:

- In 1993, the Cambodian constitution declares a liberal, multiparty democracy and the 1st national elections. However, democracy practices in Cambodia are turbulent. The royalist FUNCINPEC Party was the top vote recipient with 45.5% vote, followed by the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and the Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party respectively. Despite the victory, the FUNCINPEC had to enter into coalition talks with the CPP, who refused to hand over power. After talks, Cambodia had two Prime Ministers.
- In 1997, long tensions between the two governing parties broke into divisive fighting between FUNCINPEC and the CPP supporters, resulting in a number of casualties.
- Since the first national elections in 1993, the Cambodia People's Party (CPP) has held a strong majority in both chambers and chaired all Commissions. A newly united opposition party, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), gained an extraordinary 55 seats out of 123 in National Assembly the **2013** elections.
- The CNRP contested the results, believing they had won the election. This political deadlock was resolved, in July **2014**. Meanwhile, the Senate, in which both government and opposition were represented, continued to function normally.
- Positive democracy trends during **2015 and 2016** are overshadowed by the deterioration of the political context. Following the successful organization of commune elections in **June 2017**, which resulted in good results for the opposition Party (CNRP) winning 47% of the seats, the political climate became tense and repressive for the opposition.
- The dissolution of the CNRP in **late 2017**, the dismissal of elected councilors and replaced with unelected councilors representing the majority party CPP. Since then, the element of democratic representation has been removed. Commune councilors have a double line of accountability: upward accountability to political line the CPP and upper tiers of government, and downward accountability towards the citizens.
- **Since 2018**, politics have become increasingly autocratic, led by the ruling Party (CPP) which dominates the entire state apparatus at central and sub-national level, as well as the parliament. Most of the laws were adopted by the parliament without public consultation.
- Political activists of the former CNRP, get more harassed by authorities, summoned for questioning or detained, accused of plotting a coup against the government.
- **Freedom** of expression and assembly are **restricted** and social media heavily scrutinized. On the positive side we can mention that the space for civil society has somewhat improved, with a more regular institutionalized dialogue with the Ministry of Interior and provincial governments. CSOs focusing on human rights, natural resources and land issues still get harassed.
- Cambodia is strongly influenced by its growing economic and political ties with China. The dynamic changes of politico-social environment comes to the damage of relations with US and EU. EU has decided to suspend of Cambodia's EBA (Everything But Arms) trade preferences.

SDC engagement:

- SDC officially launches a new country programme in Cambodia in 2013. The strategy of SDC for the Mekong region is in line with the national priorities set out in the Cambodian National Strategy. The programme has a three-fold focus: Local governance and citizen's participation, agriculture and food security and employment and vocational and educational training.
- The LGCP domain aims at improving public service delivery and citizens' voices which has three-main programmes focusing on the support to Sub-National Democratic Development programme (SNDD), the support to Cambodia Parliament (PIC) and Regional Economic Development programme (GIZ).
- For the SNDD programme, SDC supports the National Committee for Democratic Development (NCDD) in the implementation of SNDD reform program, in particular, strengthening commune and district level functionality. Cambodia government has developed a 10-year Sub-national Democratic Development (SNDD) reform program (2010-2019). The implementation of the government's 10 -year reform agenda is sequenced along three phases.
- Within the decentralization reform, a significant progress has been made with regard to the functional reassignment, notably 55 functions in 19 sectors are being transferred to District, Municipality Administration (DMA) in 2020 while the national program on public administration reform has also planned a transfer of 19,000 personnel/officials to fulfill the newly revised structure at DMA. This stage requires to clearly define roles and responsibilities between central ministries and sub-national administrations, and between the different tiers of SNAs as well. Further progress concerns with the mechanisms for enhancing public service delivery at the sub-national administration (SNA) level. The mechanisms include the One-Window-Service Office (OWSO), and the Implementation of Social Accountability Framework (I-SAF), have been rolled out to nearly nationwide coverage.

Adapting:

In reaction to the political change in late 2017, Conflict Sensitivity Programme Management (CSPM) has been applied through the strategy, domain-wide and project specific. SDC has decided to "stay engaged", and adapted its programme portfolios. SDC's approaches in the Governance domain has been adapted in particular the support to the SNDD and SUPIC.

- In the SNDD, the approach has shifted from the basket fund, administered by the national government to the trust fund, administered by the World Bank, with focus on the Implementation of Social Accountability Framework (I-SAF). The promotion of local accountability systems through ISAF – only a thorough decentralized control mechanism can ensure good governance on local level. The support continues to focus mainly on the sub-national and local administrations (districts, municipalities, communes and sangkats), local citizens, civil society organizations and the private sector while keeping only minimal engagement with the national government (Ministry of Interior and/or National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development Secretariat - NCDD-S) for targeted and meaningful activities to support the SNDD reform.
- The important aspect to promote peaceful and inclusive development is to work systematically with both demand-side and supply-side of accountability in the Governance and the other domains, with a healthy working balance with government and civil society / private sector.

*** I-SAF(or citizen's participation) mechanism is government-led with the mandate and authority provided to the Mol and NCDDS aiming to improve the performance and responsiveness of public service providers, strengthened citizen engagement and citizens' voices in monitoring of public service providers and engaging in actions for improvement. Through, Community Accountability Facilitators (circa 4,000) with the support from the NGOs, play a key interface role between the citizens and the SNAs and service providers - they mobilise communities to understand their rights, facilitate the actions to improve public services, and work with local officials and service providers to facilitate the dialogue and feedback.

2. Why do authoritarian leaders and regimes sometimes display a commitment to DLG reforms despite their inherent potential of strengthening democratic local participation and accountability? How and up to what point does that go together?

- Social accountability and citizens participation in local decision making and governing processes tend to improve, partly because of massive donors' support, but also because the sole party in power has to demonstrate to its citizens that it can perform well and satisfy the (social) services needs of the people.

3. Can you describe the available spaces in your country for local communities to participate to local decision-making and for holding local authorities to account? How inclusive are local spaces for different social groups (f.eg. women, youth, rural, ethnic minorities)?

Available spaces for civil society engagement with the national government.

- There are notable measures undertaken by the government to promote dialogue with citizens. Prime Minister and Ministers have created social media pages (Facebook) to monitor the public complaints, and thereby address those complaints/questions and challenges directly.
- The amendment of the Law on the Association and Non-Governmental Organization (LANGO) is jointly reviewed and discussed by the Ministry of Interior and representatives of civil society organizations. Both parties concluded with 12 articles to be requested for amendment because the prescriptions are not clear in practice which cause hesitation for sub-national authorities to engage with civil society organizations; in some cases practice is more restrictive than the law. The process is now postponed due to COVID-19 pandemic

Available spaces in the decentralization and de-concentration reform:

- Commune Development Plan (CDP) is conducted very 5-year interval right after the commune councils elections. The participation of local communities is mandatory (participatory decision-making)
- Commune Investment Programme (CIP) is conducted on a yearly basis. The participation of local communities is mandatory (participatory decision-making)
- Commune monthly meeting. The participation of local communities is voluntary and as observers
- Interface meeting in the formulation of Joint Accountability Action Plan (JAAP) under the Social Accountability Programme (participatory decision-making). The participation of local communities is selective/invitational-based and voluntary.

- Citizen scorecard exercise for monitoring of local service delivery under the Social Accountability Programme (participatory decision-making). The participation of local communities are selective/invitational-based and voluntary.
- District Public Forum is conducted on a periodical basis and aim to discuss, collect and address the local problems faced by the local communities. The participation of local communities are selective/invitational-based and voluntary.
- One-Window-Service Office (OWSO) and Citizens' Office (Ombudsmen) is established to speed up delivery of public services and eliminate unofficial fees. The citizens can make their complaints to the Citizens' Office.

*** The participation of local communities in all local platforms is different from one event to another and generally low quality (also low turnout either before or during COVID-19 pandemic) and not inclusive due to firstly people lack of interest as many of their needs and problems are not sufficiently addressed; and secondly, the announcement or invitation are not well-informed in advance.

Inclusiveness:

In the GCP domain, SDC has applied different and approaches to address and reach the right target groups (ethnic groups, age-group and gender). However, the intended results have not been entirely achieved due to capacity and resource constraints. Hence, continued efforts with innovative measures have to be defined and applied to address their needs, with the aim of reaching out the hard-to-reach beneficiaries, i.e. ethnic groups, people with different abilities and gender.

***The M&E system does not fit enough to trace outreach of ethnic minorities, different age-groups, and people with different abilities.

4. *What are the main risks to consider related to decentralisation and local governance in your country? How do you address them in your programmes?*

Risks:

- Unimproved democratic situation, and restricted environment for freedom of expression/assembly for CSOs tend to continue in which the meaningful participation of CSOs in development would be hardly realized.
- Democratic institutions are losing momentum in Cambodia and in the region with more autocratic form of governance.
- Political discrimination in public service delivery
- Elite capture – the public resources are misused for private means by small powerful elite to the detriment of the larger population. Decentralization means the transfer of power and resources to the lower level. This again bares the risk of resources and power being captured and misappropriated by local elites.
- With Covid-19 outbreak, the economic growth will slow down, with its impact on the availability of resources for development.
- Geopolitical (China's governance model) trend would influence the reform agenda

Address or Mitigate:

The reform in governance and citizen's participation is operating in a complex environment. Therefore, a holistic approach, the inclusive participation, the strong commitment and joint effort of all actors (demand-side and supply-side) are required to realize the objectives.

Key driver of changes:

- On the supply-side, the driver of changes at the national level is the Ministry of Interior who plays a key driving role in pushing the line ministries for decentralizing the functions in their respective sectors the sub-national administrations (SNAs). Equally important the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF) who manages the transfer of financial resources and financial management, and the Ministry of Civil Service (MCS) who handles the transfer of human resources, capacity development and management.
- At the sub-national level, the province and capital (PC), district, municipality and khan (DMK), and commune and sangkat (CS) administrations are the key implementers of functions and resources transferred from the national level. It should be noted that SNAs appeared to be more empowered in their work in the multi-party political context and less empowered after the dissolution of the CNRP in 2017.
- On the demand-side, the drivers of changes include the local citizens (men and women), civil society organizations and the private sector. These groups generally lack access to information and opportunity to participate meaningfully in the governance process. Some measures have been implemented i.e. ISAF, and provided the citizens and civil society with better awareness about their rights and capability to express their demands for better local governance (i.e. better quality of service delivery, accountability, and transparency, less corruption).

Opportunities:

- Mol and NCDD-S is a key driver of changes in D&D reform. Ownership and leadership of government (Mol/NCDDS) in governance and decentralization reform increased.
- Financial transfer for development activities of sub-national administrations (SNAs), especially the districts and communes will increase remarkably from 2020 onward.
- Restructuring of district and municipal administrations with additional personnel and resources would create condition for accelerating local development and enhancing service delivery.
- The mechanism for government-CSOs dialogue has been established and functioning (National Forum on Govt-CSO Partnership organized twice a year, Provincial Consultative Workshop also organized twice a year), however, trust building and effective of this structure need to be enhanced.
- National Working Group on CSOs was established for providing specific supporting request by CSOs.
- Growing number of young people who demand for better accountability and good governance and engage in a number of global challenges
- Still in the question mark on how to engage private sector in local government reform? Work through the UN agencies?

5. Can you share some of your lessons learnt from your local governance programmes in non-democratic contexts? Did you identify specific opportunities and did you observe any unintended consequences?

Lessons learnt:

- Constructive approach rather than confrontational approach. Focusing more on the quality and responsive service delivery rather than political democracy.
- DPs should establish consultation mechanisms with CSOs/NGOs and regularly functioned.
- Include component/platform on policy dialogues with government at all levels and in a joint force with other DPs
- A certain level of engagement with the national level should be retained in order to maintain and strengthen a position for policy dialogues
- Conduct project monitoring/field visit more frequently, and meeting with the project implementing partners, CSOs, and SNAs to collect evidence to feed into the policy dialogue with government (Mol/NCDDS)

Unintended consequences:

- Donors' harmonization - moving towards fragmentation in aid modality.