CAMBODIA
Linking Citizens and the State

An Assessment of Civil Society Contributions to Good Governance in Cambodia

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LINKING CITIZENS AND THE STATE: AN ASSESSMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY CONTRIBUTIONS TO GOOD GOVERNANCE IN CAMBODIA

World Bank

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ADHOC Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association
BSO Bright Society Organization
CAS Center for Advanced Study
CBO Community Based Organization
CCC Cooperation Committee for Cambodia
CCHR Cambodia Center for Human Rights
CCSP Commune Council Support Project
CDRI Cambodia Development Resource Institute
CEDAC Centre d’Etude et de Développement Agricole Cambodgien
CIC Community Information Center
CIDA Canadian International Development Agency
CLEC Community Legal Education Center
COMFREL Committee for Free and Fair Election in Cambodia
COPCEL Conflict Prevention in Cambodian Election
CSD Center for Social Development
CSO Civil Society Organization
CTSWF Cambodian Tourism and Service Workers Federation
DP Development Partners
DMC Department of Media and Communication
FA Farmers’ Association
FGD Focus Group Discussion
GTZ German Technical Cooperation
IEC Information – Education - Communication
INGO International Non-Governmental Organization
J4P Justice for the Poor
KAP Krom Aphiwat Phum
KID Khmer Institute for Democracy
K-NAN Kampong Chan NGOs Advocacy Network
MC&D Media Consulting and Development
MEDiCAM (Network of health organizations in Cambodia)
MoEYS Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports
MONASRI Ministry of National Assembly, Senate Relations and Inspection
MRD Ministry of Rural Development
MP Member of Parliament
NDI National Democratic Institute
NEP NGOs Education Partnership
NGO Non-Governmental Organization
ODA Overseas Development Assistance
OWSO One Window Services Office
PACOCO Pagoda Coordination Committee
PACT Pact Cambodia
PAP Priority Action Program
PECSA Project to Enhance Capacity for Social Accountability
PETS Public Expenditure Tracking Survey
RUPP Royal University of Phnom Penh
RNK Radio National Kampuchea
SAC Social Accountability
SIDA Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SSC School Supporting Committee
TAF  The Asia Foundation
TI  Transparency International
UNTAC  United Nations Transitional Authorities in Cambodia
USAID  United States Agency for International Development
WB  World Bank
WMC  Women Media Center
YCC  Youth Council of Cambodia
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I. CIVIL SOCIETY CONTRIBUTIONS TO GOOD GOVERNANCE IN CAMBODIA

I.A. Introduction

i. Governance is recognized as the most critical challenge for development in Cambodia. Good governance requires not just government commitment but active demand from citizens and civil society. The government is currently involved in various initiatives to improve governance from the “inside”. The focus of this study is on the roles (rights and responsibilities) of citizens and civil society organizations (CSOs) in ensuring effective demand for good governance.

ii. Social accountability refers to the broad range of actions and mechanisms (beyond voting) that citizens can use to help the government be more effective and accountable, as well as actions on the part of government, civil society, media and other societal actors that promote or facilitate these efforts. Examples of social accountability practices include citizen/CSO efforts to:

- be better informed about government programs, actions and budgets (e.g. by obtaining documents or attending public meetings);
- publicly communicate their opinions and needs (e.g. through public opinion polls, public forums or “talk-back” radio shows);
- analyze and provide feedback on key public documents (e.g. independent policy or budget analysis);
- track public expenditures (e.g. school budgets or commune council funds);
- monitor and evaluate government services (e.g. using social audits, citizen report cards or community scorecards);
- oversee government actions (e.g. investigative journalism or corruption surveys), and;
- contribute to processes of public decision-making (e.g. citizen/CSO participation in public boards or working groups).

iii. Such approaches aim not to replace but to complement and reinforce formal mechanisms of accountability. This study assesses current social accountability practices in Cambodia, identifies key obstacles and opportunities and proposes remedies and priority actions.

I.B. Key aspects of the Cambodian context

iv. Civic engagement and social accountability in Cambodia are framed and influenced by a number of underlying contextual factors. Recent conflict has weakened trust and social cohesion and resulted in low levels of associational activity, especially in rural areas. It has also led to a lingering fear of authority and a deep desire for peace and social harmony.

v. Political factors also have an important influence on civic engagement and social accountability. Multi-party democracy is emerging but is still new and partial. Although political structures are undergoing significant change, the Cambodian administration continues to be influenced by patrimonial traditions and patron-client relationships. Power tends to be personalized rather than institutionalized, making it difficult for citizens to rely on bureaucratic mechanisms. Strong traditions of “upwards” v. “downwards” accountability pose a challenge. On the other hand, current processes of decentralization and deconcentration offer an important opportunity for bringing government “closer to the people”.
vi. **Social & cultural factors** have an important influence and are currently also in a state of flux. Traditional Cambodian society is hierarchical, emphasizes deference to authority and tends to exclude women, and other less powerful social groups, from processes of public decision-making. Despite changing values and attitudes among younger people, approaches based on active citizen monitoring and oversight of government actions represent a challenging innovation.

vii. **Citizen-state relations** are also evolving but many Cambodians, especially older people and those living in rural areas, have a highly paternalistic view of government. As a result, there is little notion of citizen rights, citizen empowerment or the obligations of government officials as duty-bearers.

viii. **Civil society** in Cambodia is also a product of the country’s unique political and social history. Most professional NGOs in Cambodia today owe their existence more to the influence and financial support of international donors than to the gradual opening up of democratic space, the natural scaling up of grassroots organizations, the emergence of a culture of volunteerism/social activism, or the organized charity of an established middle class. NGOs are highly donor dependent and most lack grassroots links. If civil society is understood in the sense of “the public arena where people freely associate to advance common interests”, then Cambodian civil society remains unarguably weak. There is little experience of institutionalized interaction between Cambodian CSOs and the state.

I.C. **Social accountability practices in Cambodia**

ix. NGOs have made important contributions to the emergence of a democratic culture in Cambodia, especially through awareness raising and training activities, but the notion of CSOs contributing to good governance by seeking and disseminating government information, participating in processes of public deliberation and decision-making and holding government accountable is newer and more challenging.

x. Though social accountability initiatives are still nascent in Cambodia, research identified a range of (small-scale) social accountability experiences at both local and national level aimed at:

• contributing to public policies and plans (e.g. efforts by NGOs to influence national policy-making or facilitate citizen participation in commune planning);
• monitoring public revenues (e.g. the nascent Publish What You Pay campaign);
• influencing public budgets (e.g. NGO Forum’s recently launched National Budget Project);
• monitoring public expenditures (e.g. efforts by the NGO Education Partnership to monitor public expenditures in that sector);
• improving public services (e.g. through KAP’s creation of citizens’ village health association committees), and;
• providing public oversight (e.g. commune monitoring committees supported by PACT, the introduction of Citizen Rating Reports by the CCSP and, parliamentary monitoring and corruption studies by the CSD).

xi. To date, the impact of social accountability initiatives in Cambodia has been limited. However research reveals evidence of considerable potential interest and willingness to expand and enhance citizen/CSO activity and impact in this area.
II. AN ANALYSIS OF CONDITIONS AND CAPACITIES FOR SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN CAMBODIA

xii. The study identified the following key elements of social accountability and found enabling/disabling factors and strengths/challenges in each area:

- Information – Can citizens access and generate relevant information?
- Voice – Can citizens voice their priorities and concerns (with the help of CSOs)?
- Association – Can citizens form associations and use those to aggregate and amplify their voice?
- Participation and Constructive Dialogue – Can citizens connect with and participate in processes of public decision-making?

II.A. Information

xiii. A key enabling factor for social accountability is for citizens to have accurate and relevant public information. Without the ability to access or generate information about public policies and procedures, budgets, expenditures, programs and services, it is difficult for citizens to formulate and voice opinions, contribute to public debates, monitor government actions, or effectively negotiate with public officials. Global experience shows that although governments are frequently initially reluctant to share information, the credibility and public trust they gain in doing so often serves to quickly convince them of the benefits of transparency.

xiv. Research found both important opportunities and challenges with regard to citizen information in the Cambodian context. Significant opportunities include the broad reach of radio and television and the fact that citizens express interest in public information (especially local-level issues that directly affect their physical well-being) and feel it is important to be informed. Key challenges include:

xv. Lack of active demand for information - Despite the interest and value they place on public information, citizen demand for public information remains largely latent due to a lack of awareness of information rights, reluctance to request “sensitive” information, and little sense of how to find information or how to use it to effect change. Research found a general feeling that governance issues are not a matter of concern for ordinary citizens and that problems of governance and poor public service delivery can only be resolved from the top down.

xvi. Lack of transparency and access to public information - Lack of active demand is compounded by low government transparency and limited access to public information in Cambodia. There is no habit in Cambodian society of sharing public information in a systematic or formal manner and no law regarding access to information has yet been passed. As a result, government officials are not accustomed to sharing information and there is often a feeling of insecurity among civil servants, especially those at lower levels, in deciding what information can/should go out and high reluctance to release information that is perceived as 'sensitive'. Research found that citizen access to public financial information (about revenues, budgets and expenditures of the Cambodian government) is particularly limited.

xvii. Low levels of citizen information & knowledge - As a result, research found that levels of citizen information & knowledge about public issues are generally low and that citizen knowledge about public finance is particularly limited. At local level, although citizens’ general knowledge about commune councils is quite good, information about commune budgets and expenditures is low. Although participants in focus group discussions often expressed their interest in knowing about the commune budget and how resources were spent, they indicated that such information is seldom available and not meant for ordinary citizens. People's low confidence and disempowerment also serve to limit demand for such information.
xviii. Weakly developed CSO information roles - Contributing to the dissemination of relevant public information and educating citizens about key issues of public concern is an important core function of civil society. However, in Cambodia, the roles of governance-oriented CSOs in accessing, generating, using and sharing information are only slowly growing and are still underdeveloped. Only a small number of CSOs have developed expertise in the areas of IEC (information-education-communication) and media with regard to governance or social accountability themes. Systematic efforts to seek out and analyze government information, or to generate and disseminate information from independent research or citizen feedback are rare. Research found that, even among professional NGOs, levels of public information & knowledge are limited. Professional NGO staff surveyed felt they had little information/knowledge about public policies, procedures and budgets.

xix. Three recommendations are proposed to address these challenges.

Recommendation A.1 – Help foster active citizen demand for public information.
For example, by:
• Encouraging CSOs working at grassroots level (in different sectors) to incorporate a “public information” component into their ongoing programs (i.e. sharing with members and target populations information about public laws, policies, plans and budgets that relate to current activities).
• Enhancing interest in governance amongst ordinary citizens through targeted IEC campaigns that provide information about basic governance institutions and processes as well as basic principles of democracy and citizens’ rights and responsibilities.
• Expediting action to adopt Public Access to Information legislation and to proactively inform citizens about: their information rights.

Recommendation A.2 - Enhance access to information of direct relevance to citizen’s well-being, especially at sub-national (i.e. commune, district and provincial) levels.
For example, by:
• Introducing a Code of Practice on access to government information.
• Instructing local-level service providers (e.g. schools and health centers) to publicly disseminate information about the budgets and expenditures.
• Monitoring and supporting commune council compliance with existing provisions for participatory planning and budget transparency.

Recommendation A.3 – Strengthen CSO knowledge about public sector/government issues and their capacities to undertake independent research, analysis and IEC for purposes of social accountability.
For example, by:
• Organizing information-sharing workshops to help CSO practitioners enhance their knowledge of relevant laws, policies, public administrative procedures, etc.
• Promoting and supporting partnerships whereby CSOs work in collaboration with government ministries to simplify and disseminate important public information.
• Providing training for CSOs in research, analysis, communication and public education activities.
• Promoting and supporting stronger relations between CSOs and media actors.

II.B. Voice

xx. Citizens' abilities to voice their opinions, needs and concerns in order to make government authorities more aware of their priorities is another key element of social accountability. If citizens are dissatisfied with public services or feel that their rights have been violated but have no means to "voice" their
experiences and concerns, then there is little prospect for positive change in favor of citizens' needs. In the Cambodian context, research once again revealed a mix of opportunities and challenges with regard to citizen voice.

xxi. Expression of citizen voice - Citizens of Cambodia demonstrate interest and willingness to use their voices, for example by participating in commune council elections and meetings. Research, however, found that people are much more likely to participate if they are explicitly and formally invited and are reluctant to publicly question or criticize government actions or authorities. Although quite a large proportion of citizens have attended commune council meetings, this participation is mostly passive (i.e. just listening) and unorganized (i.e. attending as a private individual as opposed to representing a group/association). Lack of confidence (that what they say will be listened to or acted on) and fear of reprisals were identified as important barriers to citizen voice. Public officials are not used to being scrutinized by citizens or CSOs and are often unwilling to hear critical or questioning opinions. However, research also found that current processes of decentralization, if carefully handled, offer important potential for promoting change in the attitudes and behavior of both citizens and authorities.

xxii. Citizen empowerment - Due to cultural norms and socio-political realities, citizens are disempowered and have little confidence in their (individual or collective) capacity to influence decisions or effect change. Paternalistic attitudes, the logic of patronage and fear of reprisals contribute to feelings of citizen disempowerment and helplessness. Women, youth and poor people face particular challenges in obtaining information, speaking up and influencing change. Explicit and targeted efforts are necessary to empower and support these traditionally marginalized groups. Although, at the current time, only a small sub-set of NGOs are engaged in efforts at grassroots level to empower citizens and strengthen citizen voice, research identified promising examples from which to learn.

xxiii. High reliance on local level leaders - Because of low levels of citizen empowerment and the tendency to rely on personal relations and connections, ordinary citizens rely heavily on local leaders to raise issues and voice needs and views on their behalf. Grassroots and local level leaders have enormous potential to empower and mobilize citizens, shape attitudes and behaviors, facilitate relations with public authorities, elevate local concerns to a provincial and even national level and also to provide a living model of what responsive and accountable leadership looks like. Research found that, unfortunately, many leaders (from both government and civil society at all levels) have top-down, hierarchical attitudes and little notion of "leadership as service" or "downwards accountability".

xxiv. Lack of mechanisms for citizen voice - Research found that, beyond voting and participation in commune council meetings, there are few opportunities and mechanisms for citizens/CSOs to publicly voice their views and concerns. There was regret that public forums, which can be important occasions to openly express opinions and problems in the presence of state representatives, occur very rarely at local level. Locally-based media (for example, community radio) can be a powerful tool for informing the local population about issues concerning commune/districts developments and providing a platform for individuals and groups to publicly share their opinions and concerns. Although the Cambodia media sector has expanded remarkably over the past decade, it remains almost exclusively based in Phnom Penh and largely focused on national/capital city issues. As a result of the dearth of local-level media in Cambodia, citizens and CSOs in rural areas, and even in district and provincial towns, have almost no means to access local information or make their voices publicly heard. Aside from a few independent radio call-in shows, there are also very few examples in Cambodia of interactive media (whereby ordinary citizens can express views, ask questions and communicate and interact in the public sphere).

xxv. Three recommendations are proposed to address these issues and strengthen citizen voice in Cambodia.
Recommendation B.1 – **Support initiatives to empower and build the confidence of citizens.**

For example, by:

- Studying and publicizing examples where civic engagement/citizen participation have resulted in real change and concrete benefits.
- Building the capacity of CSOs (especially those already active at grassroots level) to implement people-centered, rights-based advocacy approaches.
- Ensuring that forums for citizen expression and citizen-state dialogue (such as commune council meetings, school support committee meetings, public forums) include clear provisions and mechanisms for response and follow-up.
- Supporting programs and activities that seek to build the knowledge, confidence and civic competencies of traditionally “marginalized” groups such as women, youth and poor people.

Recommendation B.2 – **Offer training and support to existing and emerging local level leaders.**

For example, by:

- Identifying and supporting existing and emerging leaders and opinion-shapers (especially at village, commune and district levels).
- Introducing a system for democratically electing village chiefs (to replace the current practice of appointing village chiefs according to political party quotas).

Recommendation B.3 – **Expand and enhance mechanisms for citizen voice at local level.**

For example, by:

- Ensuring that forums intended to promote citizen expression and citizen-state dialogue include an explicit invitation for citizens to participate, an explicit invitation to speak, a supportive and encouraging attitude and environment (especially for less confident or less educated participants), and a facilitated process of dialogue.
- Supporting the development of local-level and interactive media, in particular community radio.
- Developing and supporting mechanisms of voice that are adapted to the specific characteristics and needs of women, youth and other marginalized groups.

II.C. Association

xxvi. Social accountability approaches are based on the collective actions of citizens and their ability to associate with one another in order to advance their interests and needs. The strength of civil society is largely determined by the breadth, depth and quality of this associational life. The size, scope and level of organization of CBOs and CSOs, their legitimacy, representativity and accountability to their own members as well as their capacity to build networks and alliances are all central to the success of social accountability activities.

xxvii. **Citizen mobilization/association** - Research revealed low levels of citizen mobilization/association as a fundamental weakness in contemporary Cambodia and identified weak trust/social capital as a key influencing factor. Among the relatively small percentage of people (23%) who belong to an organization, a majority (66.2%) belong to a traditional (often, pagoda-related) association. Although traditional associations have not typically engaged directly in issues of public governance and accountability, current processes of decentralization create potential scope for developing the role of such associations as aggregators of citizen voice and facilitators of relations between citizens and commune councils. Research found the scope and impact of “modern” CBOs (such as farmers’ associations and women’s groups) to be quite limited, with only 12.3% of public opinion poll respondents reporting belonging to such a group and most such groups remaining very small in size (due to low social capital and a preference to keep associations personal and informal). Donors have only quite recently begun to channel support to grassroots associations – and this almost exclusively through intermediary NGOs, only a limited number
of which have the requisite grassroots linkages, on-the-ground presence and skills. Some initiatives (such as CEDAC farmers’ associations) have achieved impressive results and offer important potential opportunities for learning, replication and scaling-up.

xxviii. Civil society’s internal governance challenges - For civil society to play a meaningful role in helping government to be transparent, responsive and accountable, CSOs must themselves strive to become models of the values and practices they preach. Research found that, unfortunately many CSOs in Cambodia, at all levels, suffer from a lack of internal democracy, participation and “downwards” accountability. As top-down leadership models and paternalistic attitudes prevail in Cambodia, civil society leaders (and members) often fall into patterns of governance that unwittingly create and sustain dependency and fail to encourage and empower members to speak and act on their own behalf, participate in decision-making and seek accountability. Relationships with donor institutions pose their own challenges as they often also mirror the dynamics of top-down “patronage” and place much more emphasis on “upwards” accountability (to donors) rather than “downwards accountability” (to clients/members/target populations). Research, however, found some very promising examples, both at grassroots and national level, of efforts to develop models of responsive, participatory and accountable leadership.

xxix. Civil society networking - Although impressive efforts have been made in the last decade to develop CSO information sharing and networking at all levels, research found that the effectiveness and impact of these networks remains limited (especially at sub-national levels). Only a few networks operating at national level (such as CCC, NGO Forum, Star Kampuchea, MediCam and NEP) have managed to develop well-organized systems and structures for regular information exchange and coordination. Provincial level networks are more nascent and, in many cases, struggling with very limited (financial and technical) support. At commune level, links between and among CBOs and CSOs are also very limited and these groups often face even more pronounced capacity and resource constraints. Research, however, found some successful and promising examples of network-building at local level.

xxx. Three recommendations are proposed to address these fundamental issues.

Recommendation C.1 – Support the emergence of grassroots-level citizen associations.
For example, by:

- Bringing together grassroots representatives and leaders with relevant practitioners and specialists to reflect on underlying reasons for lack of grassroots association in Cambodia and brainstorm on actions to promote association among Cambodian citizens.
- Studying existing initiatives (such as CEDAC farmers’ associations, ADHOC communities, local labor unions and village networks) to identify lessons about which approaches are most successful/sustainable (such as, the success of “interest-based” rather than “concept-based” approaches, the usefulness/necessity of linking economic and political empowerment, and the need for long-term engagement and ongoing accompaniment).
- Channeling more support and resources to grassroots-oriented CBOs and CSOs.

Recommendation C.2 – Support CSOs to become models of transparent, responsive and accountable governance.
For example, by:

- Supporting ongoing efforts by Cambodian CSOs (such as those led by CCC) to establish a common code of ethics and a system of self-regulation.
- Supporting organizational development and capacity-building initiatives aimed at improving the internal governance and management practices of CSOs.
- Donors “practicing what they preach” and “setting an example” by enhancing their own transparency and “downwards accountability”.
Recommendation C.3 – Support and facilitate more effective information-sharing, networking and coalition-building among CSOs.
For example, by:

- Supporting opportunities for CSO leaders and staff (especially those at sub-national levels) to learn about best practices in this area and to experiment with new approaches and techniques in information-sharing, networking and coalition-building.
- Funding and supporting emerging social accountability networks; province-level CSO networks; linkages among grassroots/local level associations and between grassroots-level groups and CSOs working at higher (district, province, national) levels.

II.D. Constructive dialogue & participation

xxx. The ultimate goal of social accountability is not only to enhance citizen information and voice but to elicit a response from public officials and actions that enhance government effectiveness and accountability. In order to influence government decisions and actions, CSOs often rely on unilateral strategies of criticism, persuasion and pressure - such as, advocacy, lobbying, public demonstration, protests or denouncements. The chances of effecting real change are much greater, however, when citizens and CSOs can interact directly with government counterparts and engage in constructive dialogue. Opportunities and mechanisms for citizen-state dialogue and citizen participation in processes of public deliberation and decision-making are slowly growing in Cambodia, but still limited in scope and effectiveness.

xxxii. Creating an enabling environment and institutionalizing citizen/CSO rights - Research revealed limited awareness of notions of citizen rights and responsibilities (among both citizens and government actors) and a lack of consensus regarding legitimate and “appropriate” roles for civil society. Due to the lack of an enabling environment, civil society actors engaged in (mostly unilateral and confrontational forms of) advocacy assess their impact as being “limited” and regret that they have often met with government resistance (v. the desired responsiveness).

xxxiii. From “advocacy” to constructive dialogue - Research found a large gap between apolitical and unquestioning (service delivery-oriented) organizations at one end of the spectrum and “attacking” (advocacy-oriented) CSOs at the other end. The study found that social accountability approaches offer strong potential to enhance advocacy activities and to fill in the “middle ground” (between advocacy and service delivery) with activities that seek to interact with (and even question, criticize and challenge) state actors but in a manner that is constructive, realistic, evidence-based and solution-oriented. In the Cambodian context, moving beyond unilateral and confrontational advocacy approaches to also develop possibilities for constructive dialogue and participation is a key challenge. Such a development challenges both CSOs and government officials to adopt a constructive attitude and to be willing to interact with one another despite important conflicts and differences of opinion and despite feelings of suspicion and distrust. It challenges CSOs to always back up claims with evidence and to propose solutions rather than just point out problems.

xxxiv. Enhancing the effectiveness of existing accountability mechanisms through civic engagement - Current processes of decentralization and deconcentration create important but, as yet, largely undeveloped opportunities for citizens and CSOs to engage with government authorities and public service providers at the commune, district and provincial levels. Existing mechanisms intended to facilitate citizen participation and accountability (such as citizen involvement in commune council meetings, school support committees and “accountability boxes”) have had little impact and need to be rendered more genuinely participatory, publicly visible and user-friendly in order to achieve effectiveness.
xxxv. Expanding opportunities and mechanisms for dialogue and participation - Research found limited evidence of alternative opportunities or mechanisms allowing citizens to interact and engage meaningfully with government authorities. At commune level, there have been some encouraging experiences with public forums but such initiatives are rare. At national level, opportunities for dialogue between CSOs and government actors have expanded in recent years (for example, in the form of joint forums or working groups). Such forums, however, are still limited in number and non-state participants regret the lack of clearly defined terms of engagement as well as the perceived lack of follow-up and impact.

xxxvi. Three recommendations are proposed to address current challenges and take advantage of identified opportunities.

Recommendation D.1 – Create/support an enabling policy environment for constructive dialogue and citizen/CSO participation.
For example, by:

- Bringing together key actors from both government and civil society to build consensus on fundamental principles of social accountability and the respective rights and responsibilities of citizens, CSOs and state actors.
- Creating a task force (made up of identified “champions” of social accountability from government and civil society) to propose and implement policy reforms and institutional rules aimed at promoting citizen information, voice, association and constructive dialogue and participation in governance processes.
- Exploring and developing mechanisms whereby major issues/disagreements/complaints on the part of civil society actors can be arbitrated.

Recommendation D.2 - Promote and support the use of facilitation and social accountability tools to make existing mechanisms for dialogue and participation (such as commune council meetings and school support committees) more effective.
For example, by:

- Encouraging and supporting CBOs/CSOs to develop their “bridging” role as facilitators/intermediaries between citizens and authorities.
- Providing training and capacity-building in social accountability approaches and tools for Cambodian practitioners.
- Using third party facilitators for commune council meeting; supporting pre-meeting citizen organization and, making use of social accountability tools and participatory techniques. Developing the role of commune councils in representing people’s concerns to central government and holding central government accountable on behalf of citizens.
- Providing training in facilitation and social accountability techniques to leading members of school support committees (SSCs) and; supporting efforts by SSCs to utilize social accountability methods (such as “school scorecards” and expenditure tracking techniques).

Recommendation D.3 – Introduce new opportunities and mechanisms for direct and regular dialogue and “negotiation” between citizens and the state (at all levels).
For example, by:

- Encouraging (or instructing) commune councils to organize regular facilitated public dialogue on issues of priority public concern (such as health, education, security, domestic violence, land, forests and fisheries).
- Introducing new institutionalized mechanisms of citizen feedback and oversight in sectors of key public interest (such as the management of public revenues from extractive industries).
- Creating more opportunities for government and civil society actors to meet face-to-face in both formal and informal settings and build mutual trust.
III. STRENGTHENING SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN CAMBODIA

III.A. Conclusions

Research found many weak links in the chain connecting citizens to government and many challenges relating to underlying political, socio-cultural factors, but also many important opportunities. This study proposes a range of recommendations, targeting government, civil society and development partner stakeholders. These are aimed at creating a more enabling environment for social accountability in Cambodia; developing necessary capacities and skills (within both civil society and government), and; expanding and institutionalizing spaces and mechanisms for citizen-state dialogue and negotiation, especially at the local level. The report also emphasizes the timeliness of fostering a culture of “downwards accountability” at all levels and attitudinal and behavioral changes on the part of all key stakeholders. While all the recommendations outlined in the report are considered important by the study team, the following actions (selected for their strategic impact) are strongly suggested as priorities.

III.B. Priority Actions

Suggested priority actions for the Government of Cambodia are to:

In the short term:

**Government priority action 1 - Instruct (and support) commune councils to convene biannual public forums.** (Recommendations A.2, B.3 and D.3)

Research shows that commune councils hold great (and, as yet, undeveloped) potential as a platform for citizen-state dialogue. The government is encouraged to introduce a practice of regular (biannual) public forums at commune level as an opportunity for citizens to engage with government authorities on issues of priority concern.

**Government priority action 2 - Make clear provisions for citizen/CSO participation in newly created district and provincial councils.** (Recommendations A.2, B.3 and D.3)

As present there are few opportunities for civic engagement at the district and provincial levels. The government is encouraged to issue prakas that make clear provisions for meaningful citizen and CSO participation in the new district and provincial councils (to be established according to the recently adopted Organic Law).

In the longer term:

**Government priority action 3 - Instruct schools and health facilities across the country to publicly share budget information.** (Recommendation A.2)

Research found that citizens lack access to information about basic public services that directly affect their well-being. In order to promote transparency and social accountability, the government is encouraged to instruct schools and health facilities across the country to publicly share budget information, allowing users/citizens to be informed about the allocation of public funds (and other resources) to these facilities and how these resources are used. It is recommended that annual financial statements be publicly posted and presented at an annual public forum.

**Government priority action 4 - Establish ministerial advisory groups.** (Recommendations D.1 and D.3)

Regular forums for exchange between civil society and state actors are lacking. It is recommended that the government ask all relevant ministries to establish a standing advisory group (comprised of relevant representatives/advisors from civil society, academia, private sector, etc.). These groups should meet on a regular (e.g. quarterly) basis and, according to clearly defined terms of reference, contribute to raising/discussing issues of key public concern, providing feedback on key documents and facilitating processes of public consultation on major new laws/policies.
In the short term:

**CSO priority action 1 - Expand grassroots level mobilization/empowerment initiatives.** (Recommendations B.1 and C.1)

Empowerment efforts should build on the experiences and lessons of initiatives, such as CEDAC-supported farmers’ associations and KAP village health associations, that aim to address citizens’ practical needs while also strengthening their political voice and influence. Building the knowledge, confidence and power of ordinary citizens (including women, youth and other marginalized groups) is an important element of social accountability; lack of citizen empowerment at grassroots level is arguably the principal reason why donor support over the past decade has not been more successful in generating active demand for good governance.

**CSO priority action 2 - Introduce “downwards” transparency/reporting practices.** (Recommendation C.2)

In order to become effective agents of social accountability, CSOs must themselves seek to become models of good governance by improving their own internal governance practices and systems of transparency and downwards accountability. An important aspect of this is to proactively share program and budget information with clients and target populations, and encouraging their active oversight.

In the longer term:

**CSO priority action 3 - Develop expertise in participatory, “people-centered” advocacy approaches.** (Recommendation B.1)

CSOs have a crucial role to play in empowering citizens to act and advocate on their own behalf. It is considered a priority for Cambodian CSOs to build their capacity and expertise in participatory, people-centered approaches to advocacy and development.

**CSO priority action 4 - Develop roles as facilitators of citizen-state dialogue.** (Recommendation D.2)

Experience shows that citizen-state dialogue benefits greatly from third party facilitation. CSOs have a crucial role to play as “bridges” between citizens and government authorities and are encouraged to place priority on developing and expanding these roles (especially at local level).

In the short term:

**DP priority action 1 - Support training and coaching for existing and emerging local level leaders.** (Recommendation B.2)

For ordinary citizens, grassroots and local level leaders play crucial roles as organizers, educators, advocates and intermediaries. Hence investing in the capacities and skills of local leaders to be responsive and downwardly accountable is a priority. DPs should both enhance support to CSOs currently engaged in grassroots leadership training and support capacity-building in this area.

**DP priority action 2 - Introduce “downwards” transparency/reporting practices.** (Recommendation C.2)

DPs are encouraged to “set an example” by systematically applying social accountability practices to their own operations (i.e. ensuring that end-users are informed about the allocation and use of development funds and, ideally, are involved in monitoring and evaluating these). By becoming models of transparency and reporting, DPs will not only enhance public oversight of their own funds and programs but also help citizens see what social accountability looks like in practice and, potentially, raise citizen expectations regarding government transparency and accountability.

In the longer term:

**DP priority action 3 - Expand support for grassroots level initiatives.** (Recommendations B.1 and C.1)

Citizen mobilization and empowerment is essential to the development of civil society and social accountability. Till now, only a very small portion of DP support has been devoted to directly
supporting the education, organization and empowerment of citizens at grassroots level. DPs should enhance support to those CSOs working directly at grassroots level and encourage and support national CSOs to adopt more bottom-up approaches and engage more effectively with the grassroots. 

**DP priority action 4 - Advocate for and support a more enabling policy environment for citizen/CSO participation.** (Recommendation D.1)

Encouraging and supporting the RCG to introduce policies, regulations and guidelines that create public space for citizen association, affirm and protect fundamental citizen rights and set the ground rules for meaningful citizen-state dialogue and participation is considered a priority role for DPs.
I. CIVIL SOCIETY CONTRIBUTIONS TO GOOD GOVERNANCE IN CAMBODIA

I.A. INTRODUCTION

1. Beginning at the end of the 1980s and accelerating under the United Nations-supervised peace process of the early 1990s, Cambodia has embarked on a threefold transition from civil war to peace, from one-party rule to multi-party democracy and from economic isolation to (regional and global) integration. Over the last decade, far-reaching and challenging reforms in all sectors have resulted in important progress towards ensuring peace and security, rebuilding institutions and establishing a stable macroeconomic environment. Cambodia currently enjoys very good levels of economic growth and prospects for future growth and expanding government revenues are positive due to expected oil and mining revenues and ODA commitments (including by China). Whether these fortunes translate into sustainable and equitable development and poverty reduction depend largely on questions of governance and social justice, which are therefore regarded as priority areas by many commentators on Cambodian development, including in the donor community.

2. Governance is widely recognized as the most critical challenge for development in Cambodia. While the country has made good progress in terms of the economy and poverty reduction, problems of corruption, weak accountability and other governance concerns continue to hamper development. (World Bank, Country Assistance Strategy 2005-2008:6-7) The government of Cambodia recognizes the need to tackle governance problems and both its 2004 “Rectangular Strategy” and its 2006 National Strategic Development Plan place good governance at the core of Cambodia’s development agenda. Over the past decade, a range of donors including the World Bank, have supported the government of Cambodia in its efforts to implement public sector reforms, strengthen institutions and systems of public management and develop better mechanisms of internal checks and balances. Although important progress has been made in many areas, most commentators agree that there is still a long way to go, particularly in changing the culture of service delivery and government authority that lies at the heart of governance deficiencies.

3. Global experience clearly shows that achieving good governance requires not just efforts on the part of government, but active demand for good governance from citizens. Citizens and civil society organizations (CSOs) have an essential role to play in helping the government to be effective and accountable. Democracy, government by and for the people, requires that citizens (and their organizations) play an active role, not only by voting for elected representatives, but also by communicating opinions, needs and concerns to public officials; providing feedback on policies and plans; monitoring and providing feedback on government actions, and; holding government accountable.

4. The term “social accountability” refers to the broad range of actions and mechanisms (beyond voting) that citizens can use to help the government be more effective and accountable, as well as actions on the part of government, civil society, media and other societal actors that promote or facilitate these efforts. Social accountability approaches are increasingly regarded as an important means to improve governance and development effectiveness, by promoting transparency, accountability and responsiveness in processes of public policy-making, budgeting, financial management and delivery of public services. Social accountability approaches also serve to empower citizens and contribute to the evolution of inclusive and cohesive democratic institutions. Social accountability approaches are not intended to replace but rather to complement and reinforce conventional mechanisms by which the

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1 See, for example, Donors’ Statements and Commitments at the Consultative Group for Cambodia Meeting, March 2006.

2 This report employs a number of concepts and terms related to “social accountability” and the “demand-side of good governance” that are quite new to the Cambodian context and may not be familiar to all readers. For this reason, a glossary of key terms is attached.
government itself tries to improve governance (i.e. “supply side” measures). International experience suggests that social accountability mechanisms can be effective in detecting and preventing corruption at all levels of government. In this sense, they represent a powerful addition to the government’s arsenal of anti-corruption strategies.

5. The World Bank, alongside other donors, acknowledges the crucial importance of developing the “demand” side of good governance and strongly endorses approaches aimed at promoting enhanced civic engagement and social accountability. One key objective of the World Bank’s current Country Assistance Strategy for Cambodia is to “Support Decentralization and Promote Citizens’ Partnerships for Better Governance” in particular by strengthening ‘demand side’ approaches to good governance [to complement] more common ‘supply side’ approaches…ensuring that the Cambodian people are able to hold the Government and World Bank accountable for the assistance provided; and that the Government, for its part, comes to see itself as accountable to its citizens, and not just to external donors.” The Country Assistance Strategy also stresses the importance of promoting an “enabling environment for citizens’ partnerships” as well as constructive, free, and peaceful government-donor-civil society engagement.

I.A.1. Overview of the report

6. The purpose of this study is to investigate current social accountability practices in Cambodia, identify opportunities, analyze obstacles and their underlying sources and propose remedies and priority actions. It has been carried out in the context of broader World Bank efforts to support and enhance citizen demand for good governance in Cambodia, including efforts to: promote an enabling environment for social accountability; help the government to be more responsive and accountable to its citizens; strengthen the capacity of citizens and civil society to engage with public authorities and develop mechanisms for more constructive civic engagement. The study’s findings and recommendations are intended to inform three key target audiences: the government of Cambodia, civil society actors and development partners (DPs).

7. The report finds numerous challenges as well as exciting opportunities in the Cambodian context. Compared with other liberal democracies, Cambodian citizens command relatively little influence over processes of public decision-making and have limited opportunity to demand accountability from officials. This is largely due to the newness of democratic principles and institutions in Cambodia and the recent traumatic history of the country which has severely eroded trust and “social capital”. However, the rapid evolution of democratic institutions and current processes of political reform, economic development and social change offer important opportunities for enhancing civic engagement and social accountability in Cambodia.

8. After outlining the study’s research methodology, the remainder of this first section of the report describes some key aspects of the Cambodian country context of direct relevance to social accountability, and; provides a brief overview of what citizens and CSOs are currently doing to help the government be more effective and accountable. The second section of the report is devoted to identifying and analyzing key factors that enable or disable social accountability in Cambodia and making recommendations about what’s needed to enhance social accountability. This section is organized around the following four key themes, identified as the principal elements or “building blocks” of social accountability: The study identifies strengths and weaknesses in each area and makes recommendations for overcoming obstacles and seizing opportunities with regard to each.

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3 The identification of these core building blocks draws from the Civic Engagement Analytical Framework, an analytical tool designed by the Participation and Civic Engagement Group of the World Bank to assess the conditions for civic engagement.
Information – Can citizens access and generate relevant information about issues of public concern, government decisions and actions, public policies, budgets, expenditures and programs?
Voice – Can citizens (with the help of CSOs) voice their priorities and concerns?
Association – Can citizens form associations and use those to aggregate and amplify their voice and their contributions to good governance?
Constructive Dialogue and Participation – Can citizens connect with and participate in processes of public decision-making?

Finally, the third section of the report offers conclusions and suggests a number of recommended priority immediate and longer-term actions for each targeted stakeholder group.

I.A.2. Research methodology

9. The study utilized a complementary mix of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. It drew on existing sources of theoretical and empirical knowledge and conducted its own primary research. In keeping with its central proposition which emphasizes the importance of citizen participation, the study adopted a participatory approach in its research which, in addition to collecting information and feedback from a wide array of different actors, also gave ordinary citizens, community leaders, CSOs and other stakeholders the opportunity to express their views, interact with one another and engage in collective reflection and analysis.

10. The research process began with a literature review, drawing on both published and unpublished works from Cambodian and international sources. The research team, in collaboration with staff from the Program to Enhance Capacity for Social Accountability in Cambodia (PECSA), also undertook a stock-taking of current social accountability experiences in Cambodia. Researchers from the Center for Advanced Study (CAS) gathered valuable qualitative information from interviews with key informants and focus group discussions (FGDs), conducted in four provinces and Phnom Penh. In order to collect quantitative data, the CAS research team also conducted two surveys: a public opinion poll (which collected responses from a random sample of 900 “ordinary citizens” on a range of social accountability-related issues) and a postal survey of NGOs involved in governance-oriented activities (which collected responses from 150 individuals representing 113 NGOs). Finally, the CAS research team also conducted five in-depth case studies aimed at obtaining a more detailed understanding of the motivations, experiences, successes and challenges of a range of social accountability initiatives. Recommendations and proposed actions were formulated by members of the joint CAS-World Bank team based on analysis of research findings as well as suggestions and feedback from key informants, FGD and PECSA workshop participants and members of an in-country advisory group. Preliminary drafts of the report were reviewed and improved by members of the in-country advisory group as well as a number of in-country and international reviewers.

4 This stock-taking exercise was by no means comprehensive but, nevertheless, identified close to 50 initiatives. A list of these is available on request.
5 The study team was also informed by some of the findings and recommendations resulting from a series of regional consultation workshops organized by PECSA in different regions of the country in October and November 2007.
6 Selected research findings are presented in this report. Copies of questionnaires, interview guides and survey data are available on request.
7 Advisory group members and peer reviewers are listed in the Acknowledgements. A list of participants in in-country focus group review meetings is available on request.
I.B. KEY ASPECTS OF THE CAMBODIAN COUNTRY CONTEXT

11. Civic engagement and social accountability in Cambodia are framed and influenced by a number of underlying contextual factors. These include the effects of recent conflict, political factors, socio-cultural factors, the nature and history of relationships between citizens and the state as well as specific characteristics of Cambodian civil society and CSO-state relations. While most of these factors have been studied and described in the existing literature, they are also currently in a state of flux given ongoing changes in Cambodia (as a result of economic development, international integration, demographic changes including urban migration and changes in the attitudes and behaviors of younger people). The following is a brief overview of each of these factors as they relate to the themes of civic engagement and social accountability.

I.B.1. Post-conflict

12. Cambodian society is still recovering from almost three decades of civil war and tragic social upheaval. In addition to the tragic loss of countless human lives, years of war, genocide and dictatorial rule destroyed the country’s economy, physical infrastructure and, political and social institutions. While considerable progress has been made since the peace agreement of the early 1990s, Cambodia still faces high levels of poverty and poor social and human development indicators. Of particular relevance to social accountability, years of conflict have seriously corroded trust and weakened social cohesion. It has understandably resulted in a lingering fear of authority, worries of a return to violence and a deep desire for maintaining political and social stability. As discussed in section II.C.1, this historical context has led to very low levels of associational activity. Where associations do exist, there is a tendency for them to be: very traditional and local (for example, often linked to the local pagoda); very small in size (i.e. often limited to close personal acquaintances), and; quite isolated and unconnected (i.e. having few horizontal linkages connecting them with similar associations elsewhere).

I.B.2. Political factors

13. Multi-party democracy is emerging but is still new and partial in Cambodia. Democratic institutions are nascent and not yet fully functional or effective. Although executive power is ostensibly checked through the existence of a parliament and independent judiciary, in reality these institutions do not currently have the capacity to effectively perform their mandated functions. In practice, the executive tends to dominate other branches of government. One political party, the Cambodian Peoples’ Party, continues to dominate and there is a strong legacy of viewing the government as an instrument for implementing party policy. Political parties have not yet managed to fully integrate democratic principles of participatory decision-making and downwards accountability into their internal governance practices. (Un, 2004) Democratic principles and values are still emerging and concepts such as power-sharing, active citizenship, participatory decision-making and downwards accountability are still new and not yet fully practiced. Basic citizens’ rights and freedoms, such as access to information, freedoms of open expression and participation are acknowledged but not yet fully implemented or guaranteed.

14. Cambodia has a long history as a patrimonial society, governed by authoritarian rulers often wielding absolute power (Chandler 1991:3-4). Although political structures are undergoing significant change, the Cambodian administration continues to be influenced by patrimonial traditions and patron-client relationships. Despite ongoing efforts to tackle the issue, corruption remains a pervasive and

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8 Typical in patrimonial societies, systems of patronage are established through interpersonal relationships and obligations. When a person does a favor for another person, the latter owes a 'debt of obligation' to the former. (CDRI, 2007:41). The most fundamental obligation of the client is to keep the patron rich and powerful, and thus able to maintain his authority, so that he can dispense favors back down (ibid. referring to Weber 1978).
widespread reality and a serious obstacle to development. The government’s difficulties in enhancing governance effectiveness, enforcing regulations, and improving public service delivery are in large part due to the specific ways in which informal patrimonial power structures have penetrated formal bureaucratic institutions. In recent years, the power of patrons and their networks of clients in Cambodia has merged with the formal structure of government to form what is referred to as a neo-patrimonial system of governance. Under such a system, public revenues (for example, from foreign investment, natural resources and development assistance) are “captured” and controlled as personal assets by powerful patrons. (CDRI, 2007:3; Hughes, 2003:15, 39-43) These national patrons maintain their position and influence by combining political, military, economic and administrative power through an "interlocking of pyramids of patron-client networks" (CDRI, 2007:58; Heder, 1995; Un, 2004). These obligations related to friendship, kinship and trust make public officials informally “accountable” to many players including political parties, influential business people, families and friends. In many cases the 'informal' accountability between a patron and his kin, friendship or political network is more powerful than the system of formal structures and bureaucratic rules. Under such circumstances, incentives to be transparent and responsive to citizens’ needs are undermined, activities with little potential for rents are neglected and, developmental functions of the state are jeopardized. (CDRI, 2007)

15. Power tends to be highly centralized, steeply hierarchical and personalized rather than institutionalized. Decision-making power and influence continue to be largely determined by social status and personal relations rather than institutionalized roles and responsibilities, rendering conventional (political, legal, bureaucratic and administrative) systems of accountability ineffectual and making it difficult for citizens to rely on formally established mechanisms of engagement with public authorities. Traditionally in Cambodia, power has been conceived in zero-sum terms and there is very little tradition of power-sharing among societal groups on democratic terms. As in many countries, there are strong traditions of those with less power (the governed) being “at the mercy of” and therefore accountable to the powerful (governors). The idea of political power-holders being accountable to those with less power is quite unfamiliar and runs contrary to traditional conceptions of political and social relations in Cambodia. The fundamental democratic principle of seeing power-holders as “duty-bearers” who have an obligation to serve the common public interest and account to ordinary citizens is a challenging one. In the Cambodian context, as in many countries, it demands quite a radical change from the current attitudes and behaviors of both citizens and state actors. The situation is exacerbated by a fundamental imbalance of power between the (powerful) state sector and a (relatively weak) private sector and civil society. Ultimately, the gradual growth and strengthening of civil society and private sector vis-à-vis the state are the best way to enhance social accountability in Cambodia.

16. Current processes of political reform and decentralization offer important opportunities for enhanced civic engagement and social accountability. The establishment of commune councils in 2002 offers strong potential for bringing the government ‘closer to the people’ and creating a formal interface between people and government institutions. Decentralization offers important possibilities to increase interaction of CSOs with local authorities by participating in commune council meetings, contributing to discussions about local development issues or the specific problems faced by communes/villages and, participating in decision-making processes. Research suggests that elected commune councils are beginning to change concepts and language regarding relations between citizens and the state. (Ojendal/Kim, 2007) Fieldwork found impressive levels of citizen participation in commune council meetings so far – but largely in a passive, listening role – and interest and willingness on the part of CSOs to build links and interaction with authorities. Supporting the ongoing decentralization process and

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9 According to CDRI, individuals within government do not need to hold positions of formal authority to be granted decision-making power and it is not uncommon, for example, for a secretary of state to wield more power than a minister (CDRI, 2007:54,59).

10 According to a traditional saying, “On a hill there cannot be two tigers”.

strengthening local government structures are an important strategy for promoting civic engagement and social accountability. Key challenges include developing the capacities and skills of commune chiefs and councilors and enhancing, over time, the authority and resources of local government structures. Specific priorities from a social accountability perspective include developing participatory mechanisms and skills of commune councils and working (through training, institutional reforms and incentives) to reverse the current situation in which the “upwards” accountability of local authorities to party leaders and central government authorities overrides “downwards” accountability to their own constituencies. (CDRI, 2007:59)

I.B.3. Socio-cultural factors

17. Issues of weak trust and low social capital, linked to recent conflict in Cambodia have already been discussed. Some long-standing factors linked to Cambodia’s social, cultural and religious heritage also influence social accountability-related attitudes and behaviors. **Buddhist philosophy and morality have a mixed impact with regard to notions of good governance, social accountability and justice.**

Buddhism teaches that leaders must act morally (to gain religious merit) and respect traditional codes of virtuous conduct. It therefore places strong moral pressure on political and social leaders to behave responsibly and benevolently. On the other hand, Cambodian society is characterized by a high level of inequality and strong social hierarchy and some aspects of traditional Buddhist culture have tended to encourage deference to authority and the acceptance of one’s place in this hierarchy. Belief in karma and destiny also impact Khmer notions of accountability and justice. Some observers have remarked that Cambodian Buddhism places high importance on peace, harmony and reconciliation but in a way that does not necessarily require accountability or retribution. (Marks, 1999:716-717) At the same time, however, Buddhist institutions and practices are evolving and many faith-based organizations (such as Buddhism for Development, and Santi Sena) play a very progressive role in applying core Buddhist values to address key contemporary issues such as economic development, social justice and environmental protection.

18. According to the traditional, hierarchical social order in Cambodia, women are considered to be of lower status relative to men. **The resulting unequal gender relations are an important constraint.** They both diminish the well-being of women and limit the country’s development. Women in Cambodia are disproportionately poor and under-educated. (UNIFEM et. al., 2004) Gender-based violence, including domestic violence, rape, violence against sex workers and trafficking, is a major concern. With regard to governance, Cambodia’s Gender Empowerment Measure is among the lowest in Asia, reflecting the extremely low representation of women in government and parliament. Gender relations in Cambodia, however, are undergoing tremendous change. Recent elections have seen a significant rise in the number of female candidates and elected political representatives, especially at local levels. While the culturally defined behavior norms for women, known as the *Chba'p*, continue to constrain their opportunities outside of the household, economic, social and political developments are opening up new possibilities. As discussed in subsequent sections of this report, the specific interests and needs of women must be taken into account in order to achieve effective civic engagement and social accountability in Cambodia.

19. **Conflict avoidance and a culture of "saving face" serve to reinforce social hierarchy and maintain the status quo.** Traditional Cambodian culture emphasizes the importance of behaving appropriately and graciously and avoiding creating conflict or giving offense. An overriding social norm is

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11 A strong belief in the Buddhist concepts of karma and fate (i.e. the notion that everyone has a natural, pre-determined place and cannot change one’s destiny) serves to preserve the existing social order by making feel that social change is unlikely or impossible (Chandler, 1991:4). Based on ideas of fate, poorer people tend to take their lower status as a given and expect those with higher status to redistribute wealth in order to gain merit. (CDRI, 2007:54; Legerwood/Vijghen, 2002:144)
to “maintain the balance of things”. (Luco, 2003:26) This cultural background, combined with the trauma of recent war and conflict, means that most Cambodians place high value on maintaining peaceful and harmonious relations and avoiding conflict, especially with those who are considered powerful. (CDRI, 2007:55) There is a strong inclination to keep social interactions non-binding and low-key and to choose to exit strategies over confrontation if conflicts arise. These social norms are closely connected to the high importance of saving face, both of oneself and of others. The practice of saving face is also an important characteristic of politics and, if not respected (or intentionally disregarded), can have serious consequences both in terms of damaging personal relations and causing the permanent rupture of political alliances and/or patronage ties. These socio-cultural characteristics may in part explain the limited effectiveness of civil society advocacy approaches that openly attack or adopt an aggressive stance towards government. As discussed in section II.D, such approaches have sometimes succeeded in effecting positive change, but very often they have failed to attract or sustain popular support (from deferential and conflict-averse citizens) and have tended to result in increased antagonism rather than collaboration between government and civil society.

I.B.4. Citizen-state relations

20. Power relations between state officials and civilians are characterized by steep power differentials which inhibit the ability of civilians to claim rights and freedoms in the face of official highhandedness. (Hughes/Conway, 2004:30) Many Cambodians, especially older people and those living in rural areas, have a highly paternalistic view of government. In a survey conducted in 2000, for example, 56% of the respondents considered local authorities as “parents” and ordinary citizens as “children” (CAS/TAF, 2001:26). Recent research on land conflict resolution in 2005/06 (CAS/World Bank, 2006) and field work conducted for the present study confirmed the continued prevalence of such viewpoints at the grassroots level. Ordinary citizens, especially in rural areas, expressed a deep-rooted feeling of being “at the mercy” of public officials and power-holders. As a result, there is little notion of citizen rights, citizen empowerment or the obligations of government officials as duty-bearers. The democratic obligation of the state to account to the people and the right (and responsibility) of citizens to seek information and accountability are not commonly understood/acknowledged in Cambodia as basic underlying principles of social accountability. Due to feelings of inferiority and helplessness, citizens are traditionally quite reluctant to question (let alone confront) authorities and have little expectation that the voice of "the little man" could have any influence on government actions or decisions. The traditional saying, "Don't hit a stone with an egg", expresses the view that it is hopeless for the weak to confront the powerful.

21. Despite the important influence of traditional political and socio-cultural norms, it is important to acknowledge that public attitudes, values and levels of awareness are also clearly changing in Cambodia. (Hughes, 2001; Hughes/Ojendal, 2006; Ojendal/Kim, 2006; CAS/World Bank, 2006) Cambodia has a very young population 

13 that is increasingly exposed to a wide range of non-traditional ideas due to higher mobility (significant levels of urban and international migration) and growing access to radio, television and (to a lesser extent) the internet. As described in this report, field research found some significant differences in attitudes, expectations and behaviors between younger and older

12 In one case, for example, angry villagers openly accused the commune chief of not being a responsible father to them because he had allocated village land to an external investor without consulting the concerned villagers (J4P, 2006:32). During an interview with the leadership of a farmers association in Kompong Thom province (Santuk district) the village chief was also referred to as father of the villagers who demonstrates care for his children by regularly attending the farmers association's meetings. He was also largely responsible for mobilizing villagers to establish the association by calling them repeatedly to meetings acting as a liaison to CEDAC. In a focus group discussion in Kompong Cham province (Prey Chor district), participants referred to the provincial governor as the father of the district governor, who was in turn considered the father of the commune chief and so on.

13 70% of the population is under 30 years of age.
generations of citizens. As a result, young people are potentially important drivers for change with regard to reshaping state-citizen relationships and promoting social accountability and good governance in Cambodia.

I.B.5. Civil society

22. Cambodian civil society is also a product of the country’s unique political and social history. Observers have noted that throughout Cambodia’s history, independent social groups who sought to express their opinions in the public sphere and question or influence government decisions were severely suppressed by the state. (Yonekura, 1999) In the wake of the peace agreements in the early 1990s, the international community saw the development of “civil society” as an important guarantee against the recurrence of state repression in Cambodia. (Hughes, 2003:138) UNTAC (and, over time, a large number of international organizations) supported the emergence of a range of NGOs mandated with promoting democracy, human rights, poverty reduction and social development. As a result, most professional NGOs in Cambodia today owe their existence more to the influence and financial support of international donors than to the gradual opening up of democratic space, the natural scaling up of grassroots organizations, the emergence of a culture of volunteerism/social activism or the organized charity of an established middle class.

23. The “donor-driven” nature of Cambodia’s NGO sector limits, in a number of ways, its effectiveness as a promoter of good governance and a catalyst of meaningful civic engagement and social accountability. Because they have been externally created, rather than internally ‘grown, most NGOs lack grassroots links and social embeddedness. With the (notable) exception of trade unions, most CSOs in Cambodia beyond the community level are not membership organizations and have no active constituency or social base – leading one analyst to refer to the Cambodian NGO sector as a “civil movement without citizens”. (Un, 2004:272) This disconnect from the masses and inability to demonstrate popular support undermines NGOs’ credibility and influence and has caused government officials to question their legitimacy and representativity. Its donor orientation is also likely to have caused the NGO sector to be more Phnom Penh centered than had it been driven by more endogenous pressures. While current decentralization reform has stimulated both donors and NGOs to focus more attention on community-based organizations (CBOs), efforts to empower citizens, promote grassroots participation or build civil society from the bottom-up are still limited in scale and scope. Due to their high dependence on donor funding (which some observers see as mirroring the dynamics of traditional patron-client relationships), NGOs currently have strong incentives to cater to donors’ programmatic priorities and reporting requirements and weak incentives to respond and account to grassroots constituencies. Finally, NGOs’ dependence on external donor funds also makes their financial sustainability uncertain and creates challenges in terms of reconciling foreign concepts and agendas with local (cultural, political and social) realities. As discussed in this report, both donors and Cambodian CSOs have important roles to play in addressing these issues. Box 1 provides an overview of principal categories of CSOs in Cambodia.

Box 1 – An overview of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Cambodia

Civil society organizations in Cambodia fall into the following principal groups:

1. Traditional associations – Traditional associations, committees and self-help groups, frequently linked to pagodas, represent the most common, long-standing and widespread form of associative life for ordinary citizens. While such associations exist in most villages in Cambodia, as discussed in section II.C.1 of this report, they involve only approximately 15% of villagers.

2. “Modern” community-based organizations (CBOs) – 8,000 of Cambodia’s 13,000 villages have a Village Development Committee, intended to engage rural people directly in local development and bottom-up planning. In practice, however, such committees tend to be dominated or strongly influenced
by donors, INGOs or party or local government officials and, due to this lack of autonomy are not considered genuine organizations of civil society. As discussed in section II.C.1 of this report, other types of CBOs (such as women’s, youth, farmers’ or fishermen associations) are, for the most part, a more recent phenomenon, usually created as a result of external (NGO) support. They are estimated to involve only about 12% of the population.

3. **Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)** - A recent survey (CDC for Danida, June 2006)) indicates significant recent growth of the NGO sector in Cambodia, although it suggests that many registered local NGOs are not significantly active. The survey found 1495 registered national NGOs and 337 international NGOs (at end 2005). Only an estimated 45% of national NGOs (668 in total) are considered active while 93% of registered INGOs (314) are. An estimated 100 national NGOs dominate the NGO sector, of which “about 30-40 can be considered strong” (Khlok, Nil et. al, August 2003). NGOs employ about 24,000 Cambodian staff and about 1,200 international staff. NGOs are concentrated in urban areas and especially in the capital. 70% of national NGOs have their base in Phnom Penh and half the rest are in Battambang, Kandal and Siem Reap. NGOs concentrate on service delivery, though there are signs that they are diversifying. In their registration documents, 70% of national NGOs describe their purpose as providing services in social affairs, while only 7% declared a purpose of democracy and human rights.

4. **Trade unions** - Under the People’s Republic of Kampuchea, trade unions were officially recognized mass organizations and were regarded as part of the state apparatus. During and after the UNTAC period, independent trade unions became permitted but there was not an immediate impetus to take advantage of this associational freedom. It has been the rapid growth of the garment industry in recent years that has spawned the explosion of trade unions (which are typically established at the individual factory level) and union federations. While there were just 20 registered unions in 1997, there were 245 by January 2002 and about 370 by August 2005, comprising approximately 15 federations. It is estimated that approximately 40% of the formal work force is unionized, of which a vast majority are women working in the garment sector (Makin 2006: 25). Trade unions are largely dependent on external funding sources rather than membership dues (it is estimated that only 10% of union “members” actually pay dues); their funds largely come either from domestic political sources or from donors and international labor union organizations.

5. **Youth organizations** – In Cambodia, a country where 70% of the population is under 30 years of age, youth organizations play an important role, especially in addressing issues of particular concern to young people and in building the capacity of young people to contribute to social development. There are approximately a dozen strong and dynamic youth organizations involved in social development issues, volunteerism, youth participation in political and democratic processes, networking and advocacy. In addition, there are also a growing number of student associations and clubs throughout Cambodia that have been established for multiple purposes including education and awareness raising on certain issues.

6. **Other categories** – There are growing numbers of “think tanks” and independent research organizations, mostly in Phnom Penh, which have increasing influence, particularly with donors, the media and NGOs. Independent institutions of higher learning and students’ associations are also important civil society actors, but with weaker links to the development community. There are also a few independent media organizations and associations, though these do not currently have a strong influence (see II B 4). There is a set of powerful business associations, but these may be more usefully discussed in a study of the private sector, although they increasingly engage, alongside civil society actors, in discussion of policy and governance related issues.
Cambodian NGOs have made, and continue to make, extremely important contributions to Cambodia’s political and social development. The development of a professional NGO sector should not, however, be equated with the emergence of a broader, indigenous Cambodian “civil society”. (Yonekura, 1999; SIDA, 2006:16,18) **If civil society is understood in the sense of “the public arena where people freely associate to advance common interests”**, then Cambodian civil society remains **unarguably weak**. As discussed in section II of the report, levels of citizen association at grassroots level are low, autonomous space where individuals can freely come together to express opinions and organize collective action is limited and the institutional rules and culture that characterize that space are not necessarily conducive to citizen association, expression and engagement. Efforts to “strengthen civil society” should not, therefore, be equated with developing the capacities of NGOs but should emphasize the creation of public space and an enabling environment for collective citizen action. Opening up political space and creating an enabling policy environment is largely in the hands of the government of Cambodia. Development partners have an important role to play in advocating for and supporting such processes. According to Hughes and Conway (2004:30), “It is difficult to find evidence of ‘civil society’ in Cambodia, in the sense of an arena in which individuals feel free to stake out a political position independent of that of the state official with whom he or she is conversing, and to scrutinize official actions on that basis”. This said, recent case study research has identified promising evidence of an increasing “willingness for villagers to claim openly, even against the powerful, in cases where they feel that they have been unjustly dispossessed…[due in part to]…the emergence of a more open society.” (CAS/World Bank, 2006)

I.B.6. CSO-State relations

**There is little experience of institutionalized interaction between Cambodian civil society and the state.** Prior to decentralization, there was very little possibility for CBOs to engage with public authorities. Current reforms represent a crucial opportunity to build institutionalized relationships between citizen associations and state actors at local level. With regard to CSOs working at provincial and national level, government attitude has been described as “basically skeptical” (SIDA, 2003:12) - with relations with individual organizations ranging from collaborative to hostile depending on the nature of their mandate and activities. Government representatives sometimes speak in terms of “good” NGOs (i.e. those involved in the delivery of social services) and “bad” NGOs (i.e. who question or criticize government actions or are involved in advocacy activities). With the possible exception of NGOs who focus exclusively on service delivery, relationships between government and CSOs, in particular those working in the democracy and human rights fields, tend to be characterized by mutual suspicion and distrust.

**The notion of CSOs contributing to good governance by seeking and disseminating government information, participating in processes of public deliberation and decision-making and holding government accountable is new and challenging in the Cambodian context.** As described in Box 1, among registered Cambodian NGOs only a very small sub-set (approximately 7%) are involved in democracy, advocacy and policy dialogue activities. Governance issues and processes are highly politicized in Cambodia and efforts to obtain government information, raise questions or concerns in the public sphere or scrutinize government actions tend to be viewed as challenges to government authority or acts of “opposition”. There is no doubt that over the last ten years, NGOs have contributed positively to the emergence of a democratic culture in Cambodia especially through awareness raising and training

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14 Since UNTAC, international donors and INGOs have been an important source of development resources and strong and influential advocates for good governance reforms. In future, however, the influence of these actors is very likely to dwindle as public revenues (e.g. from mining and oil revenues) grow and the need for development assistance is reduced.

15 In Cambodia, “civil society” [sangkum civil] is frequently understood as referring to NGOs.

activities. Human rights NGOs, along with a variety of other advocacy-oriented groups, have developed a vibrant community, undertaken high-profile, public campaigns on important issues and begun to strengthen links with the government and local communities. However, CSO efforts to directly help the government be more effective and accountable, for example by engaging in policy dialogue, monitoring and evaluating government actions, providing feedback and “constructive criticism” and seeking accountability are nascent and fragile. The development of these social accountability roles will help civil society fulfill its role as a vital player in helping Cambodia complete its passage to becoming a fully functioning democracy able to effectively and equitably serve the interests of all its citizens.

I.C. SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY PRACTICES IN CAMBODIA

27. Social accountability encompasses a broad array of practices and approaches. Social accountability activities can be initiated by a wide range of actors (e.g. citizens, CSOs, government officials or public service providers), use diverse strategies (e.g. research, monitoring, advocacy, participatory planning, civic education, media coverage, coalition building) and, as illustrated in Figure 1, be applied both at the local and national level and at all stages of the public policy and expenditure management cycle. Though social accountability initiatives are still nascent in Cambodia, research identified a range of (small-scale) social accountability experiences and found evidence of considerable interest and potential to expand and enhance citizen/CSO activity in this area.

Figure 1– Examples of social accountability practices in Cambodia (and the institutions supporting them)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Local&lt;-----------------------------&gt; National</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policies/plans</td>
<td>Participatory local planning, citizen/commune council dialogue and partnership (Commune councils, PACT, CCSP, GTZ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public revenues</td>
<td>Public dissemination of financial transfers to commune councils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public budgets</td>
<td>Monitoring the management of commune council budgets (Provincial accountability committees)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public expenditures</td>
<td>Monitoring local expenditures (monitoring of Priority Action Program budgets by school support committees)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public services</td>
<td>Citizen monitoring and feedback on local level public service delivery (Krom Aphiwat Phum)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I.C.1. Contributing to public policies and plans

28. Social accountability can be enhanced upstream through citizen/CSO participation in formulating public policies and plans. Such activities can be initiated by government or by civil society. For example, recent decentralization reforms and provisions for participatory local planning by commune councils, though not yet fully implemented, represent an important opportunity for upstream social accountability. Some NGOs and donors (such as PACT, CCSP, GTZ) are playing an active role in building capacities and mechanisms for effective engagement between citizens/CBOs and commune councils. See, for example, Box 2 for a description of the Local Administration and Reform (LAAR) program. At national level, a growing number of civil society organizations and coalitions have attempted to push for the introduction of new legislation or policies or influence their content - for example, the Coalition for Freedom of Information 17, the CLEC, NGO Forum and, in the environmental field, Conservation International, World Wildlife Fund and World Conservation Society. There are also a growing number of examples where CSOs have been invited by government to participate in technical working groups and multi-stakeholder forums where key public policy issues are debated. Because of the exclusive character of these forums, however, only the largest and most professional (donor-supported) CSOs participate (e.g. MEDiCAM, NEP, CLEC, NGO Forum).

Box 2 – Promoting partnership between commune councils and CBOs - The LAAR program

The Local Administration and Reform (LAAR) program, managed by PACT and supported by USAID, aims to reach over 300 communes in seven provinces. LAAR reinforces the government’s decentralization reform process by building the capacity of elected commune councils and promoting constructive partnership with CBOs. Specific goals of the LAAR program are to increase citizen participation in commune development; strengthen commune council transparency, accountability and partnership; and; improve awareness of gender, youth and natural resource management issues within communes. Also substantial decentralization progress has been made since the commune council elections in 2002. LAAR acknowledges that there is a continued need to increase citizen participation in council activities (beyond commune planning) and to develop additional transparency and accountability mechanisms in line with the government’s rectangular strategy. It identifies inadequate budgetary resources, limited staff capacity, and lack of decision-making authority as major challenges. LAAR takes a multi-dimensional approach to addressing these needs. It provides capacity building, coaching and mentoring opportunities for both civil society organizations and commune councils focused on increasing public participation in council affairs and improving transparent and accountable management of council funds. The program offers social development grants as an incentive for councils to incorporate socially-focused investments into commune planning and one-time grants to innovative commune councils, local NGOs, CBOs and village networks to support projects that aim to increase citizen involvement and civil society partnerships with commune councils. The program seeks to promote transparency and accountability at the sub-national level by employing a Commune Council Performance Assessment (CCPA) process that includes a citizen evaluation survey and commune council self-assessment. The program also supports mechanisms to increase the flow of information and dialogue between government and civil society. These mechanisms include civil society and commune council networks, provincial-level, thematic public forums, D&D working groups, inter-commune associations, the NGO Liaison Office, and regional decentralization associations. LAAR also implements an integrated media strategy to raise awareness around partnership best practices, citizen participation in commune activities, citizen and council rights, and D&D policy initiatives.

Source: www.pactcambodia.org/Programs/Program_LAAR

17 The government of Cambodia has not as yet circulated a draft of its Public Access to Information policy, which was an undertaking committed to the Government-Donor Coordination Committee. This process, and issues related to access to information legislation and practice, are discussed in section II.A.4.
I.C.2. Monitoring public revenues

29. Public finances are the means whereby government policies and plans are transformed into concrete actions, programs and services. **Citizen monitoring of public financial management is therefore an essential aspect of social accountability, and possibly the most challenging in the Cambodian context.** In order for citizens to monitor and oversee public expenditures, they must be able to access information about government revenues - still, for the most part, considered and treated as confidential by the Cambodian administration, though there are recent signs of some opening and progress. See Box 2. Recent provisions to publicly disseminate information about financial transfers to commune councils are a step towards introducing financial transparency at the local level. At the national level, the government’s willingness to consider joining the global Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, and corresponding efforts on the part of CSOs to join the global Publish What You Pay campaign, represent important opportunities to enhance transparency and accountability with regard to future oil and mining revenues.

I.C.3. Influencing public budgets

30. **Citizen involvement in formulating and analyzing public budgets is another important category of social accountability practices.** Participatory budget formulation is most common at the local level. At the national level, more common examples of budget-related social accountability practices include efforts by civil society (and government) to analyze the impact and implications of budget allocations, demystify the technical content of the budget, raise public awareness about budget-related issues, expose discrepancies between stated government policy priorities and resource allocations and undertake public education campaigns to improve budget literacy. Such activities, however, are thwarted by the general paucity of reliable information about public budgets.

31. In Cambodia, given the newness of decentralization reforms and the extremely limited financial resources of commune councils, participatory local budgeting has not yet had meaningful opportunity to develop. “Accountability boxes” intended to receive citizen complaints about misuse or mismanagement of commune budgets are a government-initiated measure to promote public oversight of local financial management. As discussed in section II, however, this mechanism has had little effectiveness to date. With regard to the national budget, the most notable social accountability initiative is that of the NGO Forum’s recently introduced National Budget Project, an initiative that seeks to inform the general public about budget issues and influence national budget formulation. See Box 3.

I.C.4. Monitoring public expenditures

32. As described above, an important aspect of social accountability is for citizens to be able to hold government accountable for how it handles public funds. In recent years, many governments around the world have been prompted by civil society to enhance their financial transparency by publicly disseminating information about accounts and expenditures. Efforts to track public expenditures or to monitor the distribution of public goods (such as medicines or school books) are examples of social accountability practices that can be applied at the national level, with the aim of analyzing the flow of financial (or physical) resources from allocation to destination and identifying leakages and/or bottlenecks in the system. This approach often involves the comparison of information received from disbursement records of finance ministries, accounts submitted by line agencies and information obtained from independent enquiry (using, for example, tools like social audits). Information is disseminated through the use of media, publications and public meetings.

33. **In Cambodia, although information about public expenditures is still difficult to access, there are a number of nascent efforts to track and monitor government spending.** At local level, for example, school support committees are officially mandated to oversee school budgets and expenditures
(even though, as discussed in section II, this rarely occurs in practice). Members of the NGO Education Partnership have also made attempts to monitor expenditures by the Ministry of Education but, again, with limited success. Two PETS have been undertaken in Cambodia by the World Bank in collaboration with government (for health and education spending) but with little CSO involvement and only limited efforts to make findings available to the general public. **In future, undertaking PETS in a more participatory manner and disseminating findings in the public sphere (in simple, user-friendly language and format) would render them a more effective tool of social accountability.**

**Box 3 – NGO Forum’s National Budget Monitoring Project**

Based on increasing civil society concerns about how upcoming oil and gas revenues (which some say may total between 500 and 1,500 million USD per annum\(^\text{18}\)) will be used, NGO Forum (with the support of the International Budget Project) has recently launched a project to monitor the management of the national budget. The *National Budget Monitoring Project* seeks to address the current lack of information related to government budgets and expenditures and to increase civil society’s capacity to engage in policy and budget discussions with the government and its development partners. In order to do so, NGO Forum has begun to organize regular meetings of the recently created Trade and Economic Development Network (TEDN), comprising approximately 18 NGOs interested in budget-work, and to develop a small resource center and database on the National Budget and relevant publications from government, donors, academia and the NGO community. In close cooperation with the (independent) Economic Institute of Cambodia (EIC), efforts have been made to analyze the 2007 budget, to assess trends in sector allocations and revenue mobilization and to develop a layman’s guide to the national budget. NGO Forum has also begun to establish working relationships with key actors in the budgetary process such as the Ministry of Economy and Finances, sectoral ministries, the budget committee in the parliament, the Auditor General, the technical working group on public finance management, donors and research institutions. Demand for public financial transparency of the government is new and challenging in the Cambodian context and NGO Forum acknowledges that achieving meaningful dialogue, consultation and cooperation with regard to processes of public financial management will take time. Access to financial information is still partial and unpredictable and often requires the use of personal relationships with well-disposed government officials or contacts with influential donors. Another key challenge is the lack of relevant knowledge and skills within Cambodian civil society for this type of work. Ongoing training and capacity building is required to help civil society actors acquire an understanding of public budgeting and financial management processes and to develop their capacity to analyze public budgets and other key financial documents.

*Source: NGO Forum, 2007.*

I.C.5. **Improving public services**

34. **Another category of social accountability practice aims to enhance the relevance, accessibility and quality of public services.** Typically, this involves citizen participation in the monitoring and evaluation of priority services. At the national level, methods such as public opinion polls, public hearings or citizens’ report cards can be used to solicit citizen feedback that can be disseminated and presented to government officials to elicit accountability and lobby for change. At the local level, a variety of participatory tools can be used (both by service providers and civil society) to help citizens monitor, evaluate and seek accountability for the effective delivery of public services. Community scorecards, for example, allow both users and service providers to independently evaluate public services, and then come together at interface meetings to share their findings, discuss problems and seek solutions.

\(^{18}\) Compared to a government budget of approx. USD 900 million
In Cambodia, groups like KAP (see Box 4) have sought to improve the quality of local public services through civic engagement, for example, through the creation of citizens’ village health association committees. At national level, NGO participation in sectoral working groups can create opportunities for civil society actors to provide feedback and raise issues with regard to priority services. By participating in the Education Sector Working Group, for example, the NGO Education Partnership network and its members have had the chance to raise issues regarding the late provision of PAP (Priority Action Program) resources to rural schools, low teacher salaries and the sale of textbooks selling (intended for distribution to rural school). Unfortunately, to date, such engagement has only occasionally resulted in concrete corrective actions.

**Box 4 – Village Health Associations – Krom Aphiwat Phum (KAP)**

KAP is a community development and poverty reduction-focused NGO, based in Battambang province. Poor people in the rural areas targeted by KAP identified poor health conditions as a priority problem. To respond to this expressed need, since 2005 KAP has provided technical support to help villagers form “village health associations” as a means to access public medical services at low or no cost. Members of such village health associations, which now operate in 37 villages of 14 communes in Battambang province report being more informed and empowered and therefore better able to negotiate access to public health services. KAP provides only technical guidance. It is the villagers themselves who identify priority needs, mobilize people to form the associations, elect association committees and set rules and by-laws. The associations, once established, have the opportunity to go on study tours to visit district and provincial hospitals and meet with directors and service providers. The study tours, organized by KAP, aim to help the associations become better informed about health services and regulations and to communicate directly with relevant health care workers and managers. Representatives who participate in the study tours are mandated to report back to and share all relevant information with other association members. The associations work with hospitals to forge an agreement to provide low or no cost health services to those association members who are too poor to pay. For identification and accountability purposes, each association member is issued an ID card and hospital staff agree to wear name tags while on duty. If hospital staff do not follow the terms of agreements or provide unsatisfactory service, association members can take note of staff names and report on it at a later stage. On a monthly or bi-monthly basis, KAP conducts meeting with associations to gather feedback from health service users, which it then uses to negotiate further improvements with health services for the association members.

*Source: CAS/WB, 2007b.*

I.C.6. Public oversight

36. A final category of social accountability practices are those that aim to improve public oversight or enhance the effectiveness of conventional oversight mechanisms. All states have some form of internal mechanisms in place to promote or ensure accountability of public servants. These include: (i) political mechanisms (e.g., constitutional constraints, separation of powers, the legislature); (ii) fiscal mechanisms (e.g., formal systems of auditing and financial accounting); (iii) administrative mechanisms (e.g., hierarchical reporting requirements, norms of public sector probity, public service codes of conduct, rules and procedures regarding transparency and public oversight), and; (iv) legal mechanisms (e.g., corruption control agencies, ombudsmen and the judiciary) (Goetz and Gaventa, 2001). In the case of Cambodia, internal mechanisms of accountability are in place but, as discussed above, their effectiveness is compromised by a number of factors including entrenched patronage structures; dominance by the executive and weak capacity of the National Assembly and the judiciary; and the paucity of government information in the public domain. Civil society has made some efforts to address these weaknesses. For example, the Center for Social Development has undertaken parliamentary monitoring, instigated a “court watch” program and publicly disseminated corruption studies. At local
level, the Commune Council Support Program has utilized Citizen Rating Reports to monitor and evaluate the performance of local government authorities.

37. Social accountability initiatives in Cambodia are limited in size and number but current experimentation combined with ongoing processes of democratization and decentralization promise potential for future development. To date, the impact of social accountability initiatives has been limited and concrete outcomes in terms of improvement in citizens’ well-being are lacking. The following section of the report analyzes some of the key factors influencing social accountability and, given the enormous potential of social accountability approaches to contribute to good governance in Cambodia, recommends actions for overcoming current obstacles and building on strengths and opportunities.
II. AN ANALYSIS OF CONDITIONS AND CAPACITIES FOR SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN CAMBODIA

II. A. INFORMATION

38. A key enabling factor for effective civic engagement and social accountability is for citizens to have accurate and relevant public information. Without the ability to access or generate information about public policies and procedures, budgets, expenditures, programs and services, it is difficult for citizens to formulate and voice opinions, contribute to public debates, monitor government actions, or effectively negotiate with public officials. Global experience shows that although governments are frequently initially reluctant to share information that has previously been considered as confidential (such as public financial information), the credibility and public trust they gain in doing so often serves to quickly convince them of the benefits of transparency.

39. Research found both important opportunities and challenges with regard to citizen information in the Cambodian context. Significant opportunities are: i) the broad reach of radio and television and, ii) the fact that citizens express interest in public information (especially local-level issues that directly affect their physical well-being) and feel it is important to be informed. Key challenges include: iii) low citizen awareness of information rights and a reluctance to request (let alone demand) 'sensitive' information; and iv) the lack of a culture of transparency and information-sharing at all levels of government, resulting in v) a generally low level of citizen information & knowledge about public issues. The vi) underdeveloped role of CSOs in accessing, disseminating and generating public information also represents both a challenge and opportunity.

II.A.1. Sources of public information

40. Radio and television have broad reach and are the most important sources of public information, even for very poor people, in Cambodia. As shown in Figure 219, according to public opinion poll findings, radio and television are the principal sources of public information in Cambodia, followed by the village chief and commune chief. This reflects a clear preference for verbal (v. written) media, also confirmed in field interviews and focus group discussions.20 Research found some significant differences between demographic groups. For example, younger people and townspeople (among whom literacy rates are higher) are more likely to also cite newspapers as a source of information. As shown in Figure 3, in contrast to better-off respondents, people who assessed their economic situation as “very poor” are more likely to seek information from relatives, friends or neighbors, rather than going to the village or commune chief – indicating weaker connections and possibly less confidence to interact with local-level leaders and “power-holders”. It is, nevertheless, striking that even among the “very poor”, the vast majority of people have access to radio and television, giving these media enormous potential as an effective vehicle for the mass dissemination of relevant public information. A number of problems and

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19 All the following figures shown in this report are based on the findings of the public opinion poll and postal survey of NGOs conducted by CAS.
20 Even information boards located near the market displaying, for example, the names and phone numbers of members of the provincial accountability committee or official fees for public services, were found to be largely ignored by local residents. During field research, hardly anyone asked was able (or interested) to say what the content of these boards were and, when asked where they could receive information about official fees for public services, only 14% of public opinion poll respondents cited the commune council information board, while 54% referred to the village chief and 44% to the commune chief. This is not to say that information boards should not be used - putting information in the public domain in a very visible way can have a positive impact even if it is rarely read. Information contained on public boards could also be disseminated by radio, for example, along with explanations about the purpose and location of information boards.
weaknesses that currently impede the effectiveness of Cambodian media as a mechanism of reliable public information and citizen voice are discussed in section II.B.4.

Figure 2 – Principal sources of public information

Source: CAS/WB, 2007

Figure 3 – Principal sources of public information of the “very poor”

Source: CAS/WB, 2007
II.A.2. **Priority citizen interests**

41. **Citizens feel it is important to be informed and express interest in obtaining public information, especially about local-level issues that directly affect their physical well-being.** Research found that an overwhelming majority of citizens feel it is important to be informed about public issues and affairs. For example, according to the public opinion poll, 94% of citizens feel it is (very or somewhat) important to be informed about Cambodian laws. The public opinion poll, as well as focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, revealed people's keen interest in a wide range of public issues, in particular, in issues of direct relevance to their concrete needs and interests. When asked about the types of information they are most interested in, respondents overwhelmingly cited issues of public security (75.3%), followed closely by health (71.7%), livelihood-related knowledge (such as agricultural techniques) (54.7%) community issues (49.2%) and government activities (48.1%). See Figure 4. There are some distinguishable gender differences, with men showing relatively more interest in public security and government activities and women placing highest priority on health.  

![Figure 4 – Citizens’ priority interests with regard to public information](image)

**Source:** CAS/WB, 2007

II.A.3. **Lack of active demand for information**

42. Despite the interest and value they place on public information, **citizen demand for public information remains largely latent due to a lack of awareness of information rights, reluctance to request “sensitive” information, and little sense of how to find information or how to use it to effect change.** Focus group discussions and field interviews revealed little awareness among citizens (and CSOs) about information rights (i.e. the obligation of authorities to systematically make information available to the public). Research found a strong feeling, especially at the grassroots level, that governance issues are not a matter of concern for ordinary citizens and that problems of governance and poor public service delivery can only be resolved from the top down. Due to traditional norms of deference to authority, citizens typically don't dare to ask for information from authorities, especially information related to public budgets/expenditures that is perceived as being “sensitive” and to seek such

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21 This primary concern with issues of public safety and security is attributed by some observers to post-conflict trauma, ongoing concerns about political instability and fears of a potential return to violence.
information may be seen as interfering in authorities’ affairs. Nor do citizens see it as their role, or right, to call authorities to account.

43. **Paternalistic attitudes and highly personalized power relations (as discussed in section I) and citizen disempowerment (as discussed in section II.B.2) also contribute to citizen reluctance to demand information.** Research conducted in four provinces found that, especially because interactions are highly personalized rather than institutionalized, citizens are reluctant to risk jeopardizing their relationships with influential community actors (such as village chiefs, commune councilors and other local officials) by asking unwelcome questions or seeking sensitive information, for example regarding financial management. The parent-children concept transferred to the authority-citizen relationship (discussed in section I) reinforces the notion of obedient reliance on authorities while citizens themselves widely consider their own possibilities or rights for demanding information as little to none. Interviews frequently revealed a high level of uncertainty about questioning or even requesting information from authorities, fearing that simply making such a request could be interpreted as an expression of distrust and lead to anger, loss of face or negative repercussions. A member of a school support committee in Kompong Thom (Stoung district), for example, explained that she does not dare to ask the school director about school expenditures because she fears jeopardizing her relationship with him and creating problems for herself and especially for her school-going children.

44. **Demanding and sharing public information such as government policies, plans and budgets is also restricted by the complexity of such information and often also by limited awareness of its relevance for citizens' own interests and livelihoods.** In rural areas low levels of education and widespread illiteracy can also limit the capacity of citizens to access and retain information, especially if it is detailed or technical.

II.A.4. **Lack of transparency and access to public information**

45. **This lack of active demand is compounded by low government transparency and limited access to public information in Cambodia.** Respondents to the NGO survey identified limited access to public information as the second most important constraint (after lack of political will) to social accountability. There is no tradition in Cambodian society of sharing public information in a systematic or formal manner and, despite persistent calls from CSOs and the donor community to introduce freedom of information legislation, no law regarding access to information has yet been passed. The government agreed in its dialogue with donors, however, to develop a policy on public access to information, as a precursor to a law, and charged the Ministry of National Assembly and Senate Relations and Inspection (MONASRI) with leadership of this. At MONASRI’s request, the World Bank organized a seminar on freedom of information laws for MONASRI officials and staff (November 2006) after which MONASRI established an inter-departmental working group (with NGO participation) that met from June-August 2007 to prepare a draft policy. This was supported by USAID/PACT and drew on an international advisory group. As of September 2008, the draft policy had still not been circulated to relevant ministers whose departments were on the working group prior to being presented to the Council of Ministers for consideration.

46. **Government officials are not accustomed to sharing information.** There is therefore often a feeling of insecurity among civil servants, especially at lower levels, in deciding what information can/should go out and a high reluctance to release information that is perceived as ‘sensitive’ (e.g. financial information). NGO representatives interviewed often underlined the difficulty of obtaining relevant information from ministries about policies, programs, budgets & expenditures. The NGO Education Partnership Network (NEP), for example, reported the virtual impossibility of obtaining information (for research purposes) from the Ministry of Education, Youths and Sports (MoEYS) about expenditures for teachers’ salaries. MoEYS officials did not feel “competent” to reveal such information and questioned the right of NEP representatives to access such information. Similar difficulties in accessing detailed and accurate
information from different ministries were reported by NGO Forum, which often had to rely on "contacts" within the government or links with influential international organizations such as the World Bank, to obtain information with regard to its National Budget Monitoring project.

47. Managing public funds and expenditures is a core function of the government and, according to principles of good governance, the government has the obligation to ensure financial transparency and accountability to the public for the use of these funds. Public financial information (for example, regarding government revenues, budgets, expenditures, audits and financial decision-making processes) should be available to all people. However, research found that citizen access to public financial information (about revenues, budgets and expenditures of the Cambodian government) is extremely limited. Although there has been progress in improving the audit function in Cambodia, public oversight of government financial management remains weak (World Bank, 2004:42; NGO Forum, 2007). Reports of the National Audit Authority have not yet been published, a sovereign procurement law with a single focal point for monitoring and enforcement is absent and it is not yet possible to access reliable, updated information relating to the assets of public officers and public procurement & expenditures. The National Assembly of Cambodia does not provide effective oversight of public financial management and citizens do not have effective mechanisms to demand that oversight.

48. This lack of a culture of transparency and information-sharing is not only limited to the public sector of Cambodia but can also be observed among civil society organizations. Researchers encountered reluctance on the part of numerous NGOs to "reveal" detailed information about their own organization's performance and governance. For example, during interviews with NGO representatives only very few were willing to provide unrestricted access to information about project proposals, budgets and evaluation reports. Most CSO staff felt inhibited and, in most cases, were not able to provide detailed information even after seeking permission from their leadership. Although there was never open refusal, the response to these "sensitive" requests made it clear that NGOs felt being transparent would put them at a disadvantage when competing for donor funds. Budget information, in particular, is typically considered confidential – despite the fact that the resources concerned are mostly received from donors who advocate transparency and whose mandate is to serve the public interests (of target groups). Transparency and information-sharing does appear to be higher among traditional associations, with 75% of public opinion poll respondents reporting having information about the incomes and expenditures of locally-based traditional associations (v. 41% for NGOs).

II.A.5. Low levels of citizen information & knowledge

49. As a result, research found that levels of citizen information & knowledge about public issues are generally low. For example, as shown in Figure 5, although almost all (94%) respondents felt that knowing about Cambodian laws is important, a large majority (72%) stated that they know little to nothing about laws. 22 Unsurprisingly, research found that citizen knowledge about public finance is particularly limited. For example, as illustrated in Figure 6, half of public opinion poll respondents reported knowing nothing about the national budget and, another 35.7% responded “don’t know”. 8.9% of respondents indicated knowing “a little” about the national budget and only 5.5% reported significant knowledge. There also is a gender gap, with a higher percentage of men (8.9%) claiming to have significant knowledge of the national budget than women (2.6%).

22 Perceived knowledge about laws does not vary significantly among age groups but it is higher among men than women and also, unsurprisingly, higher among more educated members of society.
Figure 5 – Citizens’ knowledge about laws (by gender)

Knowledge on Cambodian laws
(by gender)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>48.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>28.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CAS/WB, 2007

Figure 6 – Citizens’ knowledge about the national budget

Knowledge about national budget of the government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Significant</th>
<th>Little</th>
<th>Nothing</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>49.9</td>
<td>35.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CAS/WB, 2007

50. At local level, although citizens’ general knowledge about commune councils is quite good, information about commune budgets and expenditures is low. Although participants in focus group discussions often expressed their interest in knowing about the commune budget and how resources were spent, they indicated that such information is seldom available and not meant for ordinary citizens. For example, field research found that a large majority of citizens (81% of men and 72% of women) knew whether the composition of the commune council had changed after the 2007 elections and knew the party affiliation of the commune chief. During interviews, a number of respondents even started to list the names of individual commune councilors and their political parties. On the other hand, Figure 7 shows that only 11.4% of respondents had ever heard or seen any information about the budget of their commune (with men reporting slightly better information levels than women). Among people who had attended commune council meetings, only 21.7% received any budget information. Although the law stipulates that public hearings and consultations be held during budget planning processes, this reportedly rarely occurs in practice. People’s low confidence and disempowerment and also paternalistic attitudes serve to limit demand for such information. In one focus group discussion in Siem Reap province (Pourk
district) the general opinion was that “villagers should not be concerned with such issues” as “it is only commune councilors who make decisions and have access to such information”. People often believe that commune councilors do not want them to participate and so they do not request information for fear of offending or being rejected.

![Figure 7 – Citizens' knowledge about the commune council budget](image)

Source: CAS/WB, 2007

II.A.6. CSO information roles

51. Contributing to the dissemination of relevant public information and educating citizens about key issues of public concern is an important core function of civil society. Helping ordinary citizens to access information and understand public issues is a crucial first step towards achieving social accountability. However, in Cambodia, the roles of governance-oriented CSOs in accessing, generating, using and sharing information are only slowly growing and are still underdeveloped. As shown in Figure 8, NGOs surveyed reported very low levels of (i) activity and (ii) capacity in this area and also (iii) placed relatively little importance on access to information/media work in the context of promoting social accountability. NGOs are identified as a source of public information by only a very small number (8.3%) of respondents (see Figure 2) but, interestingly, younger people (under 30) are more than twice as likely as older people to mention NGOs as a source of information. These findings may, however, underestimate the impact of NGO information campaigns since information that people receive from local leaders, neighbors, friends and even media (radio and television) may, in fact, originate from an NGO.

52. Only a small number of CSOs have developed expertise in the areas of IEC (information-education-communication) and media with regard to governance or social accountability themes. When IEC activities have been undertaken, they have typically focused on general principles of democracy, elections and human rights or aimed to denounce specific instances of injustice, impunity or violation of human rights. NGO efforts to seek out public information, facts and evidence appear to be largely limited to specific and acute crisis situations (such as serious collective land conflicts or forced relocations). More systematic efforts to seek out and analyze government information, or to generate and disseminate information from independent research or citizen feedback are rare. Weak, sometimes tense, civil society-government relations, limited access to information and knowledge/capacity constraints are exacerbating factors.
53. Research found that, even among professional NGOs, levels of public information & knowledge are limited. As shown in Figure 9, the postal survey found that professional NGO staff respondents felt they had little information/knowledge about public policies, procedures and budgets. When asked to assess their own knowledge and capacities, NGO respondents identified knowledge on national budget policy as their greatest weakness/capacity-building need, followed by knowledge about public administration procedures and their ability to access necessary social accountability-related public information. Also striking is that more than one third of respondents left these questions unanswered, suggesting limited ability or willingness on the part of NGO respondents to critically assess their own levels of knowledge and capacity.
54. Social accountability approaches frequently require a strong knowledge base and a level of technical expertise that even professional NGOs can find challenging. Engaging effectively with state actors, especially in the context of high-level consultations and dialogue, demands not only sectoral or technical expertise but also a solid understanding of government policies and administrative, legal and judicial procedures. For example in interviews related to the activities of COPCEL, it was mentioned that during roundtable discussions with government and political party officials, civil society representatives often appeared less informed and competent on policies, regulations and procedures concerning elections than other participants. Knowledge and skills gaps can be particularly problematic in the area of public finances, which can be technically complex, and is not a typical area of expertise for civil society practitioners. The project officer of the NGO Forum's National Budget Monitoring project, which is intended to be conducted in collaboration with several interested NGOs, mentioned limited understanding of budget issues on the part of most NGOs as a considerable hurdle during the inception phase of this project. Systematic and competent budget monitoring will no doubt require ongoing capacity building efforts to increase the knowledge and expertise of civil society actors.

55. The types of information dissemination mechanisms currently used by NGOs - such as written reports, bulletins or websites are rarely tailored to reach ordinary citizens, for example, people living in rural areas with limited formal education and literacy. Such materials often include long texts and complex or difficult technical terms and, in any case, are principally printed in Phnom Penh and rarely find their way to the provincial, district, commune or village level. Field interviews indicated that citizens have rarely seen such material. As mentioned above, citizens have a clear preference for verbal (radio and television) and, if possible, direct (conversational) forms of information transmission – forms of media unfortunately only very rarely employed by public education or advocacy CSOs.

56. An exceptional CSO initiative that aims to provide access to information directly at community level and through the preferred mechanism of direct personal and verbal contact is the network of "citizen advisors" supported by KID. 254 such advisors across 9 provinces (24 districts) provide information and advice to citizens free of charge as well as direct, practical support in interacting with local authorities. The commitment and effectiveness of these citizen advisors varies greatly and the quality of information is sometimes limited (due to a lack of adequate training and other factors discussed in the case study), however, research found that active and competent citizen advisors are frequently consulted and valued by people of all strata of society (poor, rich, public servants) regardless of political affiliation or social position. Focus group discussions and interviews reflected that, where citizen advisors are active and visible, they make a significant contribution to raising awareness and understanding of citizen rights, democratic principles and administrative and legal procedures. As described in Box 5, even local authorities sometimes highly value citizen advisors as a source of information and assistance in understanding legal issues or community level problems.

23 Research found that the internet is a source of public information for only 0.2% of citizens. Although internet and email access are growing in popularity among specific (urban, well-educated) population groups (such as students or NGO staff), it is still largely inaccessible to ordinary citizens and local CSOs, especially in rural areas. An attempt by KID, for example, to establish internet-connected Citizen Information Centers in provincial towns across the country proved largely unsuccessful. Of an initial 22 offices, only 3 remain open. According to the CIC director in Kompong Cham province, visitors are usually students or NGO staff living in the provincial town. Many professional Phnom Penh-based NGOs have developed websites but research found that these are accessed almost exclusively by foreigners and specific groups of urban elite.
Box 5 – Portrait of a popular “citizen advisor”

Mr. X, a recently retired school director in Tboung Khmum district, Kompong Cham province, is a popular and well known "citizen advisor" in his commune. Since taking on this voluntary task in 2000, he has been unremittingly committed to helping villagers of his commune understand administrative and legal procedures necessary for obtaining public services or resolving disputes. The recipe of his success consists in attentive listening to citizens' problems, obtaining information from multiple sources including local authorities, discussing alternative solutions with the people involved and even trying to bring conflicting parties together and facilitating resolution processes. Mr. X is in a good position to obtain relevant information (for example, on administrative procedures, commune development plans or even commune funds and expenditures) from local authorities whenever needed because he is regularly invited to attend commune council meetings and has a trusting relationship with local authorities. This was not always the case. Local authorities were initially suspicious that a "citizen advisor" would cause trouble by "inciting" citizens to criticize and attack authorities. However, Mr. X often actively sought informal as well as formal opportunities to explain his role to local authorities and to convince them of its usefulness by demonstrating his advisory stance, based on considering the interests of all concerned parties without being biased or preferring one side. His increasing success in resolving conflicts among citizens and between citizens and local authorities, through education, consultation and mediation, has earned him not only popularity but also the official recognition and cooperation of local authorities. Today even the commune chief seeks his advice. Mr. X often uses such opportunities to communicate villagers' concerns, needs and requests to local authorities and is also highly committed to reporting back to villagers.

Source: CAS/WB, 2007b.

II.A.7. Recommendations and proposed actions

57. A first important step towards social accountability is to enhance citizen information. Research found that although citizens consider it important to be informed and express keen interest in a range of public issues, a number of factors –including a lack of awareness of information rights, limited knowledge of how to obtain and use public information and limited availability of relevant and user-friendly information – all contribute to current low levels of citizen information.

58. Three recommendations are proposed to address these factors. A first priority recommendation, primarily for CSOs but ideally realized in collaboration with government actors and with development partner (DP) support, is to (i) activate citizens’ latent demand for public information from the bottom-up, for example, by building awareness of information rights and educating citizens about how and why to access public information. Citizen demand for information also goes hand-in-hand with citizens’ confidence in their ability to use that information to effect real change. (See recommendation B.1 regarding citizen empowerment). A second recommendation is to (ii) enhance access to public information of direct relevance to citizen well-being (for example, regarding public services and expenditures in the sectors of health and education), especially at sub-national (i.e. commune, district and provincial) levels where ordinary citizens have a greater chance to access it .This recommendation is primarily addressed to relevant government and commune council actors but some of the recommended actions would be helped by CSO involvement and DP support. A third recommendation (mainly targeting DPs and CSO support organizations) is to (iii) help CSOs to be better informed and more knowledgeable about public/government issues and activities and to develop their capacities and roles in generating, accessing, simplifying and disseminating public information.
59. **Recommendation A.1 – Activate latent citizen demand for public information**

a) CSOs working at grassroots level (in all sectors) are encouraged to incorporate a “public information” component into their ongoing programs – e.g. sharing with members/target populations information about public laws, policies, plans and budgets that relate to current activities (be they in the sectors of health, education, agriculture, land, forestry, etc.), helping citizens to understand the direct relevance of such types of information to their own interests, livelihoods and well-being) and stimulating/facilitating efforts to obtain further information. Such actions should take into account the specific priorities and needs of women, youth and other target groups. (*Action required by grassroots CSOs, ideally with support from networks, higher-level CSOs and donors*)

b) Enhance the “governance literacy” of ordinary citizens through targeted IEC campaigns that provide information about basic governance institutions and processes as well as basic principles of democracy and citizens’ rights and responsibilities, and aim at stimulating citizens’ critical reflection on such information. Such activities might also be undertaken in the context of functional literacy programs (combining improved reading capacity with enhanced knowledge of key public issues and governance processes). (*Action required by CSOs, ideally a network of CSOs working at grassroots level with support from one or more NGO with requisite expertise*)

c) Expedite action to adopt Public Access to Information legislation and use the occasion to proactively inform citizens about their information rights, what information is available (as well as what is not) and, how to access it. (*Action required by government, ideally with DP support and partnering with CSOs to publicly disseminate information*)

60. **Recommendation A.2 - Enhance access to information of direct relevance to citizen’s well-being, especially at sub-national (i.e. commune, district and provincial) levels.**

a) Introduce measures to promote a more transparent and customer-oriented civil service, for example, by: introducing a Code of Practice on access to government information; introducing mechanisms for proactive information sharing (such as public interest broadcasts and local level citizen’s information and advice bureaus), and; creating incentives (e.g. through formal and informal recognition and awards, job performance evaluation criteria) for civil servants to facilitate access to information as well as the imposition of sanctions on those who impede it. (*Action required by government with DP support*)

b) Instruct local-level service providers to publicly disseminate information about the budgets and expenditures of local service centers (e.g. schools and health centers). (*Action required by government*)

c) Promote and support the development of local level and public interest media. Also build on initiatives, such as the citizens’ advisors network, to provide direct support at grassroots to assist citizens in accessing the information they need. (*Action required by CSOs with DP support*)

d) Make information and processes related to local-level planning, budgets and expenditures more open and accessible. Specifically, CSOs and government should support and monitor commune council compliance with existing provisions for participatory planning and budget transparency. Commune councils should disseminate planning, budget and expenditure information (by means of public notice boards, public forums, radio and newspaper). (*Action required by: CSOs, government and commune councils*)

61. **Recommendation A.3 – Strengthen CSO knowledge about public/government issues and their capacities to undertake independent research, analysis and IEC for purposes of social accountability.**

a) Organize targeted and sector-specific information-sharing workshops to help CSO practitioners and activists enhance their knowledge and understanding of relevant laws, policies, public administrative procedures, decision-making processes, budgets and programs. These workshops could potentially be convened, supported and facilitated by DPs but information sharing should be delivered by directly concerned public officials and sector/legal specialists. (*Action required by CSO support organizations in collaboration with interested CSOs, DPs, government and relevant specialists*)
b) Provide financial support, training and capacity-building opportunities to enhance CSO capacities for research, analysis, communication and public education activities. (Action required by DPs and CSOs)
c) Provide (long-term, untied) funding to leading Cambodian academics/intellectuals to come together to form genuinely independent think tanks, free from externally-imposed agendas and able to stimulate independent local intellectual debate, provide analytical and strategic support to grassroots activists and build the capacity of younger academics/intellectuals. (Action required by academics/intellectuals, with the support of DPs).
d) Promote and support partnerships whereby CSOs work in collaboration with government ministries (such as the ministries of agriculture, forestry and fisheries; land management, economy and finance, health, education, women’s affairs, labor and inspections) to simplify and disseminate important public information (such as the content of priority laws and policies). (Action required by government and CSOs with support from DPs)
e) Promote and support stronger relations between CSOs and media actors. (Action required by CSOs and media actors with potential support from DPs)
f) Support efforts by CSOs (such as the Budget Project of NGO Forum) to: simplify and publicize budget information; build citizens’ “budget literacy”, and; develop and apply CSO skills for budget analysis, advocacy and tracking. Facilitate and support community, CBO and CSO-led expenditure and output monitoring initiatives (building on experiences such as the Commune Monitoring Committees supported by PACT). (Action required by CSOs with support from government and DPs)

II. B. VOICE

62. Citizens' abilities to voice their opinions, needs and concerns in order to make government authorities more aware of their priorities and know how to serve citizens better is another key element of social accountability. If citizens are dissatisfied with public services or feel that their rights have been violated but have no means to "voice" their experiences and concerns, then there is little prospect for positive change in favor of citizens' needs. In the Cambodian context, research once again revealed a mix of opportunities and challenges with regard to citizen voice. Key findings and issues relate to: i) expression of citizen voice; ii) citizen empowerment; iii) the key role of local-level leaders, and; iv) lack of mechanisms for citizen voice, especially lack of sub-national media.

II.B.1 Expression of citizen voice

63. Citizens of Cambodia do demonstrate interest and willingness to use their voice, for example, by participating in commune council elections and meetings. Voting is an important mechanism whereby citizens exercise their political voice – by choosing their political representatives, expressing their preferences and providing feedback on government performance. It is encouraging that over 75% of survey respondents reported participating in the 2007 commune council elections (a figure that is quite high compared to levels of voter turn-out in the most industrialized nations). As shown in Figure 10, levels of citizen participation in commune council meetings are also quite impressive with almost one third of respondents having participated in a commune council meeting. Notable is the fact that there is no significant difference between men and women and that reported participation rates are even slightly higher among women (30% v. 27% for men).

64. Research, however, found that people are much more likely to participate if they are explicitly and formally invited.24 For example, although 70% of public opinion poll respondents knew that all citizens have the right to attend commune council meetings, as shown in Figure 11, the most common reason people gave for having not participated was that they received no formal invitation. It is notable, however, that people over 50 were almost twice as likely to cite this reason as people under 30, for whom the most

24 This observation is also supported by Pellini (Cambodia Development Review, 2005:10).
commonly cited reason for not attending was “lack of time”. See Figure 12. It is also significant, and encouraging, that only a very small number of respondents (on average 5.3%) from all age groups indicated “lack of interest” as a reason for not attending. Field interviews revealed a strong desire to avoid rejection or “losing face” and a preference for attending/participating only when there are clear official signs of being welcomed by the authorities. Participants of a focus group discussion in Kompong Thom province (Santuk district), for example, regretted that members of their farmer association had never participated in processes of formulating the commune development plan, because they were never invited. FGD participants in Siem Reap province (Pourk district) similarly reported that, in general, ordinary people do not participate in commune council meetings because they have never been invited and would fear being rejected. Even CSO leaders who regularly attend commune council meetings pointed to the necessity for them to get an official invitation.

"If they [the commune council] do not invite people by sending an invitation letter people do not dare to go. […] If they have not invited me I do not go, only if they invite me [then I will participate]."
(Leader of a cash association in Kompong Thom province, Stoung district)

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**Figure 10** – Percentage of citizens who have attended a commune council meeting

![Percentage of citizens who have attended a commune council meeting](image1)

Source: CAS/WB, 2007

**Figure 11** – Citizens’ reasons for not participating in commune council meetings

![Citizens’ reasons for not participating in commune council meetings](image2)

Source: CAS/WB, 2007
Although quite a large number of survey respondents have attended commune council meetings, this participation is mostly passive (i.e. just listening). Figure 12 shows that according to the public opinion poll, less than 10% of people (and less than 1% of women) who attended meetings spoke up, and even smaller numbers dared to raise problems, ask questions or make demands. The importance attributed to receiving an official invitation and reluctance to speak reveals citizens' desire to respect the wishes of public authorities and to not be perceived as imposing or overstepping boundaries.

Research found reluctance on the part of ordinary citizens to publicly express any form of disagreement or criticism of government actions or authorities. Interviews and FGDs in four provinces revealed that villagers feel highly insecure in confronting or criticizing the performance of authorities and fear that doing so might provoke anger or retribution. Village chiefs, commune councilors and other local officials are influential figures in many aspects of community life and citizens are understandably reluctant to risk jeopardizing their relationships with such individuals by asking unwelcome questions or raising sensitive issues. Interviews and FGDs revealed that citizens are not
hesitant to criticize poor public services or to denounce perceived injustices in private, but they are reluctant to do so in public. A citizen advisor in Kompong Cham province (Tboung Khmum district), reported that people make complaints when they are dissatisfied (e.g. with low quality public works) but that: "Such criticisms are often made behind the back of authorities while, in a public meeting, people do not dare to speak up". A similar observation was made by an assistant to the village chief (and member of a local farmers’ association) in Kompong Thom province (Santuk district), who reported that "Villagers do not tell their dissatisfaction to the village chief or commune chief directly. They only dare to talk behind the village chief’s back. They have never raised such issues publicly."

67. Public officials are not used to being scrutinized or criticized for their performance by citizens and representatives of civil society and the expression of critical or even questioning opinions is not necessarily encouraged or accepted. According to interviewees and FGD participants, freedom of expression is not systematically respected or protected. Those who question, criticize or “blow the whistle” are often labeled 'inciters' or even 'political opponents' by authorities and can reportedly face reprisals (such as social marginalization, denial of services or even physical threats). Interviewees reported multiple cases were citizens who had expressed criticisms or alternative viewpoints suffered negative consequences. For example, in reference to a group of citizens who had protested their eviction due to the construction of a new road near the town of Battambang, a participant in a FGD stated, “They decided to speak up. Now they have big trouble.” Even NGO representatives often feel inhibited in the presence of authority figures and do not dare to directly raise objections or ask critical (“provocative”) questions. For example, the single civil society representative (among 13 government members) of one Provincial Accountability Committee reported feeling “outnumbered” and “unprotected” and therefore refrained from asking sensitive questions or making critical remarks.

68. However, research also found that current processes of decentralization, if carefully handled, offer important potential for promoting change in the attitudes and behaviors of both citizens and authorities. In one commune in Kompong Thom province (Stoung district), for example, the research team experienced a vibrant network of several traditional associations coordinated by a pagoda coordination committee (PaCoCo), that has built constructive links to the commune council and engages in regular communication about the problems, concerns and needs of the villagers. As described below in Box 6, this interaction is a result of a long-term process (involving four provincial-based NGOs, supported by GTZ) aimed at strengthening the capacity of local traditional associations, CBOs and CSOs to promote and facilitate citizen participation in commune-level decision-making processes.

Box 6 – An example of strengthening citizen voice in the context of decentralization

During focus group discussions and interviews in Kompong Thom province (Stoung district), leaders of traditional associations reported changing attitudes both on the part of villagers and authorities in their commune. According to the PaCoCo chief, training workshops and regular public discussions about principles of decentralization have served to greatly improve communications between local associations and commune council committee leaders. The introduced practices of discussing the commune development plan in the village, to send comments and suggestions to the commune council and to participate in the commune council meetings have contributed to enhanced villager engagement and improved relations with local authorities. Before, villagers were not happy to see public officials involved in the coordination/network committees and preferred to keep them out. At the same time, authorities felt threatened by the increased networking of associations and creation of committees for better coordination, and nervous that participating CSOs might report criticisms of local authorities' performance to higher levels. Attitudes on the part of both villagers and local authorities have now changed considerably. The

25 Convened by the World Bank’s PECSA program in October 2007.
II.B. 2 Citizen empowerment

69. Due to cultural norms and socio-political realities, citizens are disempowered and have little confidence in their (individual or collective) capacity to influence decisions or effect change. Paternalistic attitudes, the logic of patronage and fear of reprisals contribute to feelings of citizen disempowerment and helplessness. For example, when asked whether ordinary citizens could influence the administration of the school budget via school supporting committees, a majority of public opinion poll respondents said no. When asked about who could protect people from paying informal fees to authorities, it is striking that the top response (28%) was “nobody” – indicating quite a strong feeling of helplessness in the face of entrenched systems of patronage and kick-backs. As shown in Figure 13, the next most common response (23% of respondents) was that “central government” could effect such a change, while “collective resistance” on the part of citizens scored very low (at only 7%) – indicating again, a very low sense of citizen empowerment and a strong sense that only government, and especially highly placed authorities, can bring about change. In interviews and FGDs, both villagers and provincial level NGO staff similarly expressed the view that citizens have no other mechanisms available to them and that only high level authorities have the power to change these practices. When asked about who could influence decisions regarding the national budget, Figure 14 shows that less than one tenth (8.7%) of all respondents felt that NGOs could have an influence and 0% indicated that citizens or CBOs could have an influence. Confidence in the influence of elected representatives is also low, with only a quarter (26.5%) of respondents holding the opinion that the National Assembly could influence the budget. Most people indicated that it is the Prime Minister (44%) or “central government” (36%) only who make such decisions. This lack of confidence on the part of citizens that they can (individually or collectively) influence public decision-making is an important barrier to achieving civic engagement and social accountability.

70. Women, youth and poor people face particular challenges in obtaining information, speaking up and influencing change. Explicit and targeted efforts are necessary to empower and support these traditionally marginalized groups. Although, at the current time, only a small sub-set of NGOs are engaged in efforts at grassroots level to empower citizens and strengthen citizen voice, there are a few promising examples from which to learn. (See, for example, Boxes 2, 6, 8 and 10).

Source: CAS/WB, 2007b

26 It is notable that among the “very poor”, only 8% of respondents felt that the National Assembly or central government could influence the budget, with a majority holding the opinion that only the prime minister himself could influence such decisions.
II.B.3 High reliance on local level leaders

71. Because of low levels of citizen empowerment, lack of confidence in institutions, and the tendency to rely on personal relations and connections, ordinary citizens rely heavily on the initiative and intervention of local level leaders. Influential individuals (such as village and commune chiefs, community leaders, heads of associations, school teachers, etc.) play an extremely important role as intermediaries and “brokers”. For example, as shown in Figure 15, according to the public opinion poll if people are dissatisfied with a public service, they are most likely to approach the village chief or commune chief for assistance. It is striking that, after these two, the next highest response as to whom people turn to is “nobody”!27

27 Significant, and encouraging, is the fact that the response of “nobody” was much lower among young people in the 18-30 age range (16%) than among people over fifty years old (37%). Young people were also slightly more likely to
72. In field interviews people also often emphasized the exceptional role of village chiefs in initiating, coordinating and overseeing village activities and mentioned that villagers rarely become actively involved in community related activities without the invitation or endorsement of the village chief.

"It was the village chief who collected villagers for the initial meeting with CEDAC and he was also one of the focal persons in the village for initiating the creation of the farmers association."

*Members of a farmers association in Takeo province (Tram Kâk district)*

"When KID conducts trainings, it is the village chief who informs and collects villagers to participate in the meeting."

*Citizen Advisor in Kompong Cham province ( Tbong Khmum district)*

**Figure 16 – To whom do citizens turn with a complaint about public service?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If you are dissatisfied with public service in your commune to whom do you turn for resolution?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neighbors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nobody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commune chief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village chief</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CAS/WB, 2007

73. In addition to a high degree of reliance on local leaders, research also identified a number of weaknesses and challenges related to leadership including traditions of top-down, paternalistic (v. “bottom-up”, democratic) leadership at all levels; a high level of personalization (v. institutionalization) of leadership roles, and the tendency for leadership roles to be highly concentrated (e.g. the village chief is also the leader of the local farmers’ association, etc.). Many local leaders (from both government and civil society) have top-down, hierarchical attitudes and little notion of "leadership as service" or "downwards accountability". As a result, rather than seeking to empower or strengthen the voice of citizens, many leaders use their authority to make unilateral decisions and grant “favors”, thus perpetuating traditional systems of domination and patronage. Local leaders (both public authorities and non-state actors) who are genuinely committed to promoting participatory development and citizen empowerment, frequently have limited capacity and resources and lack access to training and support.

turn to an NGO for assistance but, overall, the response of “NGO” was generally very low (about 13%) among all age groups and qualitative research suggests that this response probably indicates personal contact with a trusted, individual NGO leader (v. seeking an institutional response).
II.B.4  Lack of mechanisms for citizen voice

74. Beyond voting and participation in commune council meetings, there are few opportunities and mechanisms for citizens/CSOs at local level to publicly voice their views and concerns. Interviews with grassroots CSO leaders and members indicate that public forums (if carefully designed to encourage and protect freedom of expression) are seen as an important mechanism to openly express opinions and problems in the presence of state representatives and other concerned citizens. Such direct verbal interactions are much preferred over more anonymous, written forms of voice (such as the commune complaint boxes). For example, commune-level forums organized by provincially based NGOs (supported by NDI) in the run-up to the 2007 commune elections proved very popular and often attracted large crowds. Research found, however, that such public forums are very rare occurrences at local level. Most public forums are organized by Phnom Penh-based NGOs and, due to limited resources and organizational capacities, take place in the capital city and are restricted to select group of participants identified by the host organization. A few organizations, such as the Cambodian Center for Human Rights and the Center for Social Development, have organized public forums in provincial capitals but only very rarely at district level and almost never at commune or village level.

75. At the national level, larger, professional NGOs have access to a broader range of voicing mechanisms (such as workshops, seminars, press conferences, publications and websites) but they also face a number of challenges in mobilizing/demonstrating popular support and eliciting a response from government. A few of the larger NGO networks (such as NGO Forum, NEP or MEDI-CAM) have the possibility of communicating directly with top-level officials by participating in forums such as Technical Working Groups or provincial Executive Committees meetings. At the current time, however, access to such forums is limited to a very small number of NGO “elite” who are, in turn, highly dependent on donor funding and influenced by donor interests and priorities. As a result, such voices do not always necessarily reflect the priority needs and concerns of the grassroots. For example, research found that many of the socio-political issues of highest concerns to ordinary citizens (for example, fear of organized crime, the failure of police to protect poor people and the massive migration of young people from rural areas into cities or abroad in search of employment) are not addressed by NGO advocacy programs and are largely absent from the public arena, while a few "high profile" topics (such as human rights abuses and conflicts over public land) tend to dominate. According to some, it is a difficult challenge for NGOs to not exclusively “serve the needs of the international community” while overlooking grassroots voices that may not necessarily align with donors' priorities and interests.

76. In many countries, an important means whereby citizens can voice their opinions and discuss public issues is mass media. Experience shows that almost all successful social accountability initiatives make strategic use of the media to disseminate information, raise awareness around public interest matters, express popular opinion and create public pressure. Independent media is frequently a leading force in informing/educating citizens, monitoring government performance and exposing misdeeds. (Malena, 2004) In Cambodia, however, a number of factors seriously limit the role of media as a vehicle of citizen voice and social accountability.

77. Although the sector has expanded remarkably over the past decade, Cambodian media remains almost exclusively based in the capital of Phnom Penh. With the exception of a handful of public and independent regional radio stations (in Siem Reap, Kampot and the Northeast) there is no

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28 From 2003 to 2006, for example, the CCHR conducted 165 public forums at provincial and district levels, mostly on issues related to land conflicts. (CCHR Annual report 2005-2006:17)
29 In the early 1990s only one television station, three radio stations and a handful of newspapers existed. (Weiss, 2004:3) Today, Cambodia has seven television channels, 20 radio stations (Freedom House, 2006) and around 200 newspapers/magazines (interview with editor-in-chief of Samné Thmey, 02.05.2007).
broadcast media based outside Phnom Penh. There are also no newspapers based outside the capital, as limited readership and buying power seems to make them financially unviable. As described below in Box 7, the only regional newspaper ever established in four provinces some years ago (Samné Thmey) was forced to move back to Phnom Penh once donor support ran out and sales were insufficient to achieve financial sustainability. Locally-based media (for example, community radio) can be a powerful tool for informing the local population about issues concerning commune/districts developments and providing a platform for individuals and groups to publicly share their opinions and concerns. As a result of the dearth of local-level media in Cambodia, citizens and CSOs in rural areas, and even in district and provincial towns, have almost no means to access local information or make their voices publicly heard.

78. Media offers more potential as a vehicle of citizen voice when it is interactive and open to contributions from ordinary citizens and other societal actors outside of elite government or business circles. There are currently no citizen or community-run media outlets in Cambodia and examples of interactive media (whereby ordinary citizens can express views, ask questions and communicate and interact in the public sphere) are largely limited to a few independent radio call-in shows. The costs involved in accessing a phone and making a call, mean that most call-in shows are limited to a relatively small number of regular (urban, better off) participants and, therefore, do not succeed in making the voices of poorer or rural-based people heard. Radio National Kampuchea, the state radio station, has also recently introduced call-in programs and, offers to call participants back after they have given their phone number, thus reducing costs to the caller.

Box 7 – An example of developing regional print media for giving voice to the local level

Founded in 2004 by Media Consulting and Development (MCD), Samné Thmey initially received funding from USAID through The Asia Foundation as well as a grant from the Soros Foundation to develop a pilot project aimed at developing a local source of information and voice for rural people. Two reporters in four provinces (Kampong Cham, Siem Reap, Battambang, and Sihanouk Ville) collected local news from districts and communes, interviewed local authorities and representatives of civil society and wrote weekly articles about, for example, the activities of local authorities, decentralization efforts, agriculture issues, questions of social welfare, and local development events. The newspaper aimed to help local populations (including local authorities and grassroots CSO leaders) to develop a stronger and shared understanding of local issues, events, concerns and developments. During the period of full funding support, Samné Thmey distributed 10,000 copies of the weekly (some free of charge) to districts within their target provinces. It was a difficult start. In the beginning, local authorities were suspicious and reluctant to cooperate with reporters in giving interviews or information related to specific local issues. The majority of customers were locally based NGOs while only very few ordinary people bought the newspaper. After more than a year of publication, attitudes slowly changed. More and more people realized that the information given by the local newspaper was helpful in understanding local realities and what was going on in their commune/district. Some also realized that the local newspaper was a good medium for making their concerns known to (especially provincial) authorities, and increasingly asked the newspaper to publish stories about this or that problem, for example complaints about the lack of a market for selling agriculture products in the region. At the same time, local authorities (especially at the provincial level) became increasingly interested in the local newspaper as a source of concrete information about the mood and concerns of citizens in their districts/communes. However, the reluctance to buy the newspaper (rather than receiving free copies) could not be overcome. Even in the provincial and district towns, few people proved willing to spend 2000 Riel for a weekly paper. As soon as external funding stopped, Samné Thmey was not able to survive in the provinces. Today the paper focuses on national level events and is available only in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap.

Source: CAS/WB, 2007b
79. Press freedoms are not fully acknowledged nor protected in Cambodia. The mass media has long been used by the political elite as an instrument of power and propaganda and today media in Cambodia remains subject to a high level of political control and/or self-censorship. (Weiss, 2004:4-8) The vast majority of media outlets in Cambodia today are dependent on funding from political patrons and partisan leanings are clear. Broadcast media, especially TV, is heavily dominated by the ruling CPP party and offers very limited space for voices that question or criticize the government. (Un, 2004; SIDA, 2006) Print media is relatively more free and accessible to all major political parties, but is limited to urban areas and reaches less than 10% of the population, mostly wealthier and better-educated groups. Nevertheless, the two largest and most-read Khmer newspapers are considered pro-ruling party and show little inclination to address sensitive issues or to give space to opinions that are critical or different from those of the government. English language newspapers enjoy considerably more freedom than their Khmer counterparts but still tend to exercise prudence in reporting about sensitive issues (such as corruption), face challenges in accessing accurate information, and are read by only very limited number of (mostly urban, elite) Khmer.

80. The small number of journalists who undertake investigative and public interest reporting frequently meet with harassment, threats and pressure to reveal their sources when powerful political or government figures are associated with corruption scandals, land grabbing or mismanagement of public resources. It is not uncommon for journalists who criticize the government to be faced with government-initiated civil litigation and politically-influenced prosecutions on the basis of several (ambiguous and controversial) defamation provisions in the penal code, Press Law and Disinformation Law. In some cases, journalists have been detained and suspended for criticizing government actions. There is no direct censorship of the media but the arbitrary use of these defamation laws serves to encourage self-censorship and deter journalists from reporting on sensitive cases.

81. Over the past decade, media capacity has improved significantly in terms of equipment, training and programming. With foreign support, the Department of Media and Communication of the Royal University of Phnom Penh has produced a first generation of well-qualified journalists (of both print and broadcast media) and is engaged in continued efforts to build the professionalism of both new and experienced journalists. Some NGOs, like PACT Cambodia, have also been actively involved in training Cambodian journalists with the goal of promoting more transparent reporting and investigative journalism. Despite this progress, the overall quality and credibility of journalistic practices remains weak. (Bou and Salazar, 2005) Many journalists are poorly paid and, therefore, vulnerable to bribery for running or burying stories. (SIDA, 2006:7). Some observers have remarked that many Khmer journalists tailor their coverage according to who is paying them rather than according to principles of truthful and objective reporting. (Transparency International, 2006:27) According to the editor-in-chief of a weekly magazine, "Some journalists even resort to blackmailing people by threatening to publish critical or even faked information, thus bringing the whole profession of journalism into discredit." The unethical or unprofessional behavior of many journalists serves to perpetuate a vicious and unhelpful circle of media accusations and government denials. Poorly researched stories and lack of well-founded arguments make government officials distrustful and uncommunicative, which in turn leads to inaccuracies and reports based on suspicions and speculations. Although several associations for journalists exist, none of them has so far been able to effectively protect their professional interests and press freedoms, or to ensure

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30 Between 2003 and 2004, at least eight criminal defamation complaints were lodged by the government or government officials against media representatives. (SIDA, 2006:7)

31 In 2005, for example, the owner of the independent and popular Beehive radio station (FM 105) was detained after broadcasting a program which expressed views critical of a government border agreement with Vietnam. Although he was released after several months, his arrest had a chilling effect on the climate in which independent media is operating.
journalistic quality and professionalism and promote a situation in which media regulates itself in accordance with ethical standards.

82. **As yet, CSO relations with journalists and use of media remain limited.** In Cambodia, civil society's expression of opinions, concerns or criticisms through media is limited to a very small number of the most professional, Phnom Penh-based NGOs who have the means to buy newspaper space or air time (on private radio stations). These activities may include broadcasting public forums or round table discussions with representatives of civil society (e.g. COMFREL and CSD) or inviting radio listeners to ask questions or express opinions during call-in shows on a given topic such as human rights or democracy (e.g. CSD, CCHR-VOD, YCC). Such NGO broadcasts, however, reach only a small listening audience - in part because the private radio stations they use (such as FM 102 Women’s Media Center and FM105 Beehive Radio) have rather limited coverage throughout the country. Because media is concentrated exclusively in Phnom Penh, sub-national CSOs rarely make use of mass media for voicing their concerns. Local and provincial groups find it difficult to bring 'insignificant' local events to the attention of national level media. In interviews, CSO representatives identified lack of trust in the credibility of journalists and inability to pay (formal and “informal”) fees as additional barriers.

"We have little connection to the media as we don’t consider them effective in disseminating labor unions' concerns. To the contrary, they sometimes misreport things or present things in a biased way and we have already had to demand retractions.”
*Representative of CTSWF (labor union), Phnom Penh*

"Although media can play an important role in dealing with collective conflicts, as we have seen in cases over land/forest, many newspapers are also bringing stories that do not reflect the reality and this is something we [NGOs] vehemently disapprove." *NGO director in Kompong Thom province*

"The [provincial] NGO network rarely uses media to express issues and concerns because we don’t have the money." *NGO representative in Siem Reap province*

83. **Use of the media is again limited by a general reluctance to bring complaints or criticisms, especially regarding government authorities or actions, into the open.** CBOs, and even district and provincial-level NGOs, seek to avoid open or public “confrontations” with commune council or district officials through media as they fear it could anger officials or be seen as “slander”. In interviews and FGDs, provincial level advocates indicated that, unlike bigger Phnom Penh-based NGOs who enjoy the support and “protection” of international NGOs and donors, sub-national groups feel weak and vulnerable. They feel that local issues are unlikely to attract the attention or support of INGOs/donors, who are perceived as only intervening in the case of extreme cases involving high levels of authorities (such as collective conflicts over natural resources and land).

84. The development of an increasingly independent, professional and vibrant media is, in itself, an important ingredient of social accountability and continued efforts to strengthen the media in Cambodia should be acknowledged as an integral part of broader efforts to “strengthen civil society”. (Bou and Salazar, 2005) Media actors have a crucial role to play not only in monitoring government actions, informing the public and providing a vehicle for citizen voice, but also as advocates of freedom of

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32 While Radio National Kampuchea (RNK) broadcasts with 100KW power, the private radio station Beehive (FM 105) started with 5KW power and has recently upgraded to 10KW, the same as the NGO-like radio WMC (FM 102). Field interviews in rural areas (e.g. in Siem Reap and Kompong Thom provinces) found that people have little awareness of such broadcasts.
expression and defenders of information rights. So far, efforts to support non-state media have been quite limited in size and scope, focused mainly on the development of technical skills. Enhanced efforts are needed, for example, to promote a more conducive environment for independent media, specifically promoting investigative, public interest journalism and strengthening links between media and other civil society actors.

85. Even though a non-reading culture and preference for verbal interaction prevails in Cambodia, investment in the development of print media should not be abandoned. Although only a small percentage of people read newspapers, those who do are influential (e.g. policy-makers, researchers, and opinion shapers). Newspaper headlines and articles are also frequently picked up and retransmitted by radio. Information that people are receiving from neighbors, friends, village chiefs, etc. may also originate from newspapers. From a social accountability perspective, print media is an important means to publicly record and disseminate more technical or detailed information (such as budget or expenditure figures) that it is difficult to communicate verbally. The written word is also a powerful media with which to share more in-depth analyses and to discuss public issues in more detail. Over time, literacy and purchasing power will grow and newspaper sales, both within and outside the capital, can be expected to grow. 33 Also, as print media currently offers much more public space to civil society viewpoints than broadcast media, it would be wise to work on both fronts – opening up broadcast media for social accountability issues as well as developing citizens' interest in print media. 34 It is important to acknowledge that such development will take time and will require long-term vision and support on the part of government, donors and others.

II.B.5. Recommendations and proposed actions

86. Research found that Cambodian citizens express and demonstrate a desire to voice their concerns, opinions and needs but that a number of factors currently restrict their willingness and ability to do so. Lack of confidence (that what they say will be listened to or acted on) and fear of reprisals were identified as important barriers to citizen voice. As a result citizens rely heavily on local leaders to raise issues and voice needs and views on their behalf. Grassroots and local level leaders have enormous potential to: empower and mobilize citizens, shape attitudes and behaviors, facilitate relations with public authorities, elevate local concerns to a provincial and even national level and also to provide a living model of what responsive and accountable leadership looks like. Research also revealed a dearth of opportunities and mechanisms for citizens to voice their views (e.g. due to a lack of media and public forums at local level).

87. Three recommendations are proposed to address these issues and, thereby, contribute to strengthening citizen voice in Cambodia. The first (mainly addressed to CSOs and DPs) is to (i) support and implement initiatives that empower and build citizens' confidence and demonstrate that citizen voices and actions can make a difference. Given the crucially important role of local level leaders, a second recommendation (addressed to government, CSOs and DPs) is to (ii) invest in nurturing and supporting models of representative and accountable leadership at grassroots and local level. A third recommendation is to (iii) expand spaces and mechanisms for citizen voice at local level, making explicit efforts to ensure that “weak” voices (those of women, youth and poor people) are not drowned out by “stronger” voices.

33 Already, for example, the public opinion poll found that younger people (under 30) were twice as likely as older people to identify newspapers as a source of public information. Also, people living in provincial towns were three times more likely to read newspapers than those living in district towns or villages.

34 A possibility that might be explored is to incorporate more public interest articles into popular magazines, (such as Prâchebrey for example). Using popular magazines to cover a mix of issues would contribute to depoliticizing and demystifying issues of public information, while reaching a broad and diverse audience since, unlike more specialized or intellectual publications, such magazines are enjoyed by a range of readers including ordinary citizens, civil society and government representatives alike.
88. **Recommendation B.1** – Support initiatives that empower and build the confidence of citizens.

a) Identify and analyze examples where civic engagement/citizen participation have resulted in real change and concrete benefits. Document and publicly disseminate lessons, outcomes and impacts. *(Action required by CSOs, with support from DPs)*

b) Build the capacity of CSOs (especially those already active at grassroots level) to implement people-centered, rights based advocacy approaches which incorporate processes of public awareness-raising, popular mobilization and, building the capacity of ordinary citizens to identify their own priorities and speak/advocate on their own behalf. This will require not just skills training but deeper and longer-term attitude and behavior-changing learning opportunities that expose CSO staff to ideas, values and mind-sets associated with an “empowerment” based approach to development – building, for example, on initiatives like VBNK’s experiential learning CHART project. *(Action required by: CSOs with support from DPs)*

c) Learn from, replicate and scale up existing CSO efforts that aim (not just to “assist” or “speak on behalf of” citizens but) to build the knowledge, confidence and capacities of citizens, contributing to their economic and political empowerment. *(Action required by: CSOs with support from DPs)*

d) Ensure that forums for citizen expression and citizen-state dialogue (such as public forums, commune council meetings, school support committee meetings, public consultations, meetings of “joint” committees and working groups) are “safe spaces” where citizens can speak without fear of reprisals and include clear provisions and mechanisms for response and follow-up (in order to build citizens’ confidence that speaking up/participating will make a difference). *(Action required by: government, commune councils and CSOs with support from DPs)*

e) Support programs and activities that seek to build the knowledge, confidence and civic competencies of traditionally “marginalized” groups such as women, youth and poor people. *(Action required by CSOs with support from DPs)*

89. **Recommendation B.2** – Offer training and support to existing and emerging local level leaders.

a) Identify and provide (ideally long-term, self-reflective and experiential) training and ongoing support to existing and emerging leaders and opinion-shapers (especially at village, commune and district levels), focusing on models of responsive and accountable leadership and principles of public service, participatory governance and integrity. Particular emphasis should be placed on nurturing women and youth leaders. *(Action required by CSOs with support from DPs)*

b) Given their key importance as agents of local development and citizen support, introduce a system for democratically electing village chiefs - to replace the current practice of appointing village chiefs according to political party quotas. *(Action required by government)*

90. **Recommendation B.3** – Expand and enhance mechanisms for citizen voice at local level.

a) Work with identified “champions” within government and civil society to promote a policy environment and working relationships that encourage the free expression of diverse ideas and viewpoints, honest feedback and “constructive criticism” without fear of reprisal. *(Action required by government and CSOs with support from DPs)*

b) Ensure that forums intended to promote citizen expression and citizen-state dialogue (such as public forums, commune council meetings, school support committee meetings, public consultations, meetings of “joint” committees and working groups) include an explicit invitation for citizens to participate, an explicit invitation to speak, a supportive and encouraging attitude and environment (especially for less confident or less educated participants), and; a facilitated process of dialogue. *(Action required by government, commune councils and CSOs with support from DPs)*

c) Support the development of interactive and local level media, in particular, community radio. As a first step, identify and provide support to community groups who are interested in producing local programs

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35 See [http://www.vbnk.org/chart.htm](http://www.vbnk.org/chart.htm).

36 Again, the VBNK CHART project offers a useful model.

37 For example, in the context of the World Bank’s current Program to Enhance Capacity for Social Accountability.
and encourage (especially provincial) public and private radio stations to provide airtime for such programs. (*Action required by the Ministry of Information, media support organizations, radio stations and CSOs with support from DPs*)

d) Develop and support mechanisms of voice that are adapted to the specific characteristics and needs of marginalized groups (e.g. promoting the voice of youth through music and radio, supporting the emergence of women’s grassroots organizations and networks, organizing citizen-state dialogues and “negotiations” that focus specifically on the needs of the poor and very poor). (*Action required by CSOs with support from DPs*)

II.C. ASSOCIATION

91. Social accountability approaches are based on the collective actions of citizens and their ability to “associate” with one another in order to advance their interests and needs. The strength of civil society is largely determined by the breadth, depth and quality of this associational life. The level of organization of CSOs, their legitimacy, representativity and accountability to their own members as well as their capacity to build networks and alliances are all central to the success of social accountability activities. As already alluded to in section I of this report, i) **low levels of citizen mobilization/association at grassroots level** is a fundamental weakness of current Cambodian civil society. Other important (and related) challenges include ii) **strengthening the internal governance of CSOs** and iii) **enhancing the capacities of civil society actors to effectively network and establish alliances**.

II.C.1 Citizen mobilization/association

92. According to public opinion poll findings, **citizen membership in associations and organizations is low in Cambodia**. As shown in Figure 16, when asked if they belong to any kind of organization, only 23% of people polled responded positively. This is quite low when compared internationally. Almost all (95.5%) of those who responded positively belong to only one organization. 4% said they are member in two organizations and only 0.5% in more than two organizations. Figure 17 and 18 show how citizen association is influenced by age, gender and demographic factors. The survey found that older people are more likely to belong to organizations than younger people and that people living in villages/rural areas are almost twice as likely to belong to organizations as those living in towns/cities.

![Figure 17 – Levels of membership in CSOs](image)

Source: CAS/WB, 2007
93. Among people who are members of organizations, a majority (66.2%) belong to traditional associations. As Figure 19 shows, this is equally true of older and younger respondents. Traditional associational life in Cambodia is characterized by loose and informal organizational structures, often grouped around pagodas and aimed at serving local community needs guided by Buddhist concepts of compassion, making merit (including generosity and morality) and karma. Pagodas and the committees and associations linked to them are usually non-political and their principal importance from a social accountability perspective is as a vehicle for building social capital. Such associations promote strong bonding linkages among members and some bridging linkages between different associations, but historically have weak linkages with local authorities (Pellini/Ayres, 2005:15) and lack established channels for articulating demands to the state. (Hughes/Conway 2004:28)

94. Although they have not typically engaged directly in issues of public governance and accountability, current processes of decentralization create potential scope for developing the role of traditional associations as aggregators of citizen voice and facilitators of relations between citizens and commune councils. For example, the research team encountered at least a few cases where traditional associations were playing such a role, especially in those areas of the country where there is a strong
tradition of association. In Kompong Thom province (Stoung district), for example, one community member stated:

"In our village, we have three strong traditional associations dating back to the 1950s initiated and coordinated by the pagoda committee – the rice association, cash association and school association. Almost all villagers regularly contribute to these associations, except the extremely poor who cannot afford to contribute. But if, for example the commune council requests a contribution for implementing development projects in the commune, the cash association pays for all villagers regardless of whether or not they have contributed to the association."

**Figure 20 – CSO membership by type of organization and age**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CSO membership (type &amp; age)</th>
<th>Traditional group</th>
<th>Saving/ Credit group</th>
<th>Local NGO</th>
<th>Women's group</th>
<th>Farmer/ Fishermen group</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>more than 50</td>
<td>71.7</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>15.1</td>
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<td>31-50</td>
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<td>18-30</td>
<td>70.8</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>15.3</td>
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Source: CAS/WB, 2007

95. Other types of “modern” CBOs (such as women’s, farmers’ or fishermen associations) are, for the most part, a more recent phenomenon, usually created as a result of external (NGO) support, and very often reliant on ongoing external inputs or incentives to function. Since the early 1990s, donors working in collaboration with national NGOs have sought to promote participatory local development by supporting the creation and development of grassroots associations and CBOs. Research, however, found the scope and impact of such “modern” CBOs to be quite limited, with only 12.3% of public opinion poll respondents reporting belonging to such a group. With a few notable exceptions (discussed below), research found little evidence of such groups engaging with local authorities or facilitating citizen-state relations. For example, the public opinion poll found that, on average, people who belong to a CSO are no better informed about commune budgets than non-members and that, among citizens who had attended commune council meetings, only 12% did so as a representative of an association or organization.

96. Due to low social capital and a desire to avoid conflict, people are often uncomfortable entering into a group with perceived "rigid” and “formal” structures and rules. They prefer to associate only with people they personally know and trust, ideally, within a context that allows enough flexibility to exit or opt out of group activities discreetly and without ruffling feathers. Such attitudes were encountered both at village level (with regard to grassroots associations) and also in the context of higher-level

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38 Research found that some areas appear to have stronger traditions of associational life than others. The strong traditional association life in Kompong Thom province does not appear to be representative of the whole country.

39 Though members of a local “NGO” were almost three times as likely to be informed about the commune council budget as members of a “traditional association”. 
organizations. A trade union leader in a garment factory in Kompong Cham town, for example, described the difficulties of trying to mobilize and sustain the active involvement of members. Although some three hundred members were formally registered, in reality, only those who had direct personal ties and regular physical contact with the factory union leader dared to participate actively. Workers who didn’t know the leader personally, held membership cards but remained inactive.

97. Professional NGOs (which constitute the majority of registered CSOs in Cambodia) are rarely membership organizations and, for the most part, lack grassroots constituencies. NGOs typically consist of small numbers of paid staff, defending a certain cause or advocating ‘on behalf of’ a certain target populations (such as women, children or poor people) but lacking meaningful and sustained linkages with such groups. For example, the public opinion poll found that less than 3% of citizens report belonging to a local NGO (as an employee, volunteer, member or informal associate).

98. Despite the rather limited scope and impact of “modern” CBOs, there are a few promising examples that offer important potential opportunities for learning, replication and scaling-up. Examples such as CEDAC farmers’ associations (described below in Box 8) and local trade unions, for example, illustrate the necessity of addressing members’ concrete livelihood interests and needs and the importance of simultaneously supporting political and economic empowerment. Such examples point to the need to both deepen and expand citizen empowerment efforts at grassroots level. Given low current levels of social capital and limited organizational and management capacities at local level, mobilization/empowerment initiatives require close and ongoing accompaniment/facilitation, investments in capacity development/skills building and long-term commitment.

Box 8 – CEDAC Farmers’ Associations

Since 1998 farmers have begun to organize themselves into village-based associations and networks with support from CEDAC. These associations are playing an important role in promoting mutual help, solidarity and cooperation among villagers as well as coordinating and undertaking collective action in developing ecological agriculture, natural resource management, cooperative business and community development. Typical activities of these associations are agriculture extension, community led saving and credit, group marketing, training for young farmers, capacity building for women groups, support to poorest families and awareness raising on issues related to conservation of natural resources. Some farmers’ associations have also started to play a role in seeking to influence local development plans and challenging local authorities to be more effectiveness in the areas of community development and natural resource management by regularly attending commune council meetings to ask questions and propose initiatives and actions to be undertaken in collaboration with local authorities. To date, 1,017 village-based farmers’ associations have been formed in 11 provinces, representing approximately 27,500 households. Most associations are still in the stage of learning and experimenting with basic principles of collective management and building their knowledge of improved agricultural techniques, marketing strategies and related issues affecting their livelihoods. Low levels of literacy among farmers and relative inexperience in articulating and pursuing common interests through formal associative structures makes this is a challenging and protracted endeavor. Qualitative research (on three well-established associations), however, revealed an impressive level of autonomous management capacity as well as high levels of trust in leaders and collective self-confidence in the ability of the association to promote members’ concrete interests. Increased agriculture production, as a result of techniques introduced by CEDAC, has improved the economic situation of associated farmers and further contributed to building trust and confidence. Over time this has led some associations to engage in a broader range of local development issues (for example, by contributing to commune development projects such as road reparations or pond digging). In Takeo, for example, some association members who were increasingly dissatisfied with the bad condition of the road that connected their village to the nearest market, took the initiative of collecting funds (from
association members and other villagers) and stimulating the commune to repair the road. CEDAC has also played a successful role in helping farmers associations to organize meetings with commune councils and in facilitating consultations with other government representatives (such as meetings between women’s groups and the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, health authorities, etc.) Despite such successful examples, the development of relationships between associations and local authorities is still nascent and will require a significant level of ongoing support from CEDAC and its partners.

Source: CAS/WB, 2007b

II.C.2 Civil society’s internal governance challenges

99. CSOs, from grassroots to national level, face important internal governance and accountability challenges. Field interviews and qualitative research found, unsurprisingly, that many of the governance and accountability challenges faced by state institutions are mirrored in civil society organizations. For local level CSOs in particular, low organizational and management capacity and skills affect day-to-day functioning and limit prospects for organizational development and scaling up. Low levels of trust/social capital and paternalistic (v. democratic) patterns of leadership are also important constraints. Since people are more accustomed to informal, personalized, dyadic relations (based on personal rank and status), the idea of introducing institutional rules and procedures instead of hierarchical and personalized structures, is innovative and challenging. Field interviews often revealed inexperience and difficulty in managing bigger, more formalized associations.

"Community leaders do not want to have many members because it makes the group difficult to administer. If there would not be this obstacle the [number of] members of our community would be higher."

Two members of a (ADHOC supported) community for promoting/defending human rights in Kompong Cham province (Prey Chhor district)

"Since the creation of my group more families were interested to join but they were not admitted because it was said that if the group is too big it is difficult to manage. They have been advised to create their own group".

Leader of a women's group within a (CEDAC supported) farmers association in Kompong Cham (Choeung Prey district)

100. For civil society to play a meaningful role in helping government to be effective and accountable, CSOs must themselves strive to become models of the values and practices they preach. Unfortunately many CSOs in Cambodia, at all levels, suffer from a lack of internal democracy, participation and “downwards” accountability. Many Cambodian CSOs, including professional NGOs, are formed around charismatic leaders (often its founders) on whom the success and very existence of the organization is often highly dependent. Such leaders (at community through to national levels) play a crucially important role but few of these have had the opportunity to learn and develop transparent, democratic, participatory and accountable leadership skills. As top-down leadership models and paternalistic attitudes prevail in Cambodia, civil society leaders (and members) often fall into patterns of governance that unwittingly create and sustain dependency and fail to encourage and empower members to speak and act on their own behalf, participate in decision-making and seek accountability.40 For example, interviews with members of traditional associations in Kompong Thom province (Stoung district) found that the quality of associational life depends highly on the personality of the leaders who feel entitled to speak on behalf of the association based on their individual legitimacy and achievements rather than as a representative and defender of (a democratically agreed set of) member interests and rights. Association members are usually attracted by the leaders' morality and/or capacity to provide benefits. In such context they do not claim control or accountability but simply rely on leaders to resolve

40 See, for example, O’Leary and Meas, 2001.
any problems that arise. In interviews and FGDs, some local leaders complained about the tendency of members to rely on them entirely rather than taking action on their own. At the same time, research found that leaders often left little space for members to articulate their own concerns or develop their own capacities. A focus group discussion with farmer association members in Takeo province (Tram Kâk district), for example, was heavily dominated by the charismatic and highly capable leader while members rarely expressed their own ideas, opinions or experiences. Many felt inhibited to talk and were happy to leave it to their articulate leadership who appeared to be used to speaking on behalf of the group rather than encouraging and empowering members to speak up for themselves.

101. Qualitative research indicates that “modern” CSOs with fixed formal structures, including NGOs with paid staff, often display the same leader-centered, personalized management style and lack of democratic/participatory governance. Relations with donor institutions pose their own challenges as these relationships often, again, mirror the dynamics of top-down “patronage” relationships and place much more emphasis on “upwards” accountability (to donors) instead of “downwards accountability” (to clients/members/target populations). While traditional associations usually have a strong element of voluntarism, are dependent on mobilizing internal resources from membership itself and esteem values such as leader's morality, research found that NGO leaders appear to feel less bound to consult with or report to members of staff and feel more responsible and accountable to their donors rather than to their members or staff. A 2006 assessment of CSOs, for example, found that “While most CSOs continue to advocate such values as democracy, transparency, accountability, participation [...], only some of these values inform their internal operations.” (SIDA, 2006) Despite these widely acknowledged challenges and weaknesses, as shown in Figure 20, participants in the NGO survey nevertheless tended to give very high ratings to their own governance and accountability practices – indicating some level of denial about internal challenges and/or a reluctance to publicly admit shortcomings (i.e. that might jeopardize an organization’s reputation or funding).

102. Research also found some promising examples of efforts at grassroots level to develop models of responsive, participatory and accountable leadership. CEDAC, for example, not only provides training in agricultural techniques to respond to farmers’ livelihood interests, but also pays attention to developing the leadership and management capacities of farmers’ association leaders. Interviewed leaders of (successful) farmers associations emphasized how important it is for them to practice management procedures that are transparent, fair and understood and accepted by all members of the association. They also stressed the importance of ensuring that members feel represented and supported in their aspirations for livelihood improvement. As a FA leader in Kompong Cham province, (Choeung Prey district) said "farmers usually lack trust and have little initial interest in joining a formal group". With CEDAC's expertise and support, FA leaders are encouraged to build trust and set a democratic example by regularly sharing information, accepting feedback and involving members in decision-making processes through regular consultation. Transparency in leadership, especially regarding financial matters, is of utmost importance. According to the same FA leader in Kompong Cham province, "Without clarity about exactly how members’ contributions have been used, the association would have no members." However, becoming more experienced and improving respective management capacity is a long process, especially with regard to leadership qualities and stronger networking among each other. Limited literacy among farmers means that intense verbal communication between leaders and members is required in order to ensure full understanding of internal bylaws, regulations and procedures.
103. During discussions with Cambodian Tourism and Service Workers Federation (CTSWF) members in Siem Reap town several participants emphasized that the then deputy local CTSWF union leader in Siem Reap (today the president of the CTSWF) played a crucial role in forming local union groups by combining strong leadership qualities (such as popularity and organizational capacity) with a highly responsive and participatory attitude. His resoluteness in leading strike action as well as his regular feedback about ongoing negotiations to the strikers and his participatory decision-making style motivated members to sustain the strike until the end of the dispute. In focus group discussions and interviews, **union members underlined regular communication with leadership and participation in decision-making processes as key motivating factors**. Union members also demonstrated an impressive level of knowledge of labor and legal issues self-confidence in running their groups.

"It is the membership that makes the union alive and successful, not me [the leader]. I am only responsible for coordinating members' activities in a way that can resolve all conflicts to the benefit of both sides by always trying to create a win-win-situation. This does not mean refraining from defending our interests. If no resolution can be negotiated, then we will resort to a strike, but only if this is the decision of the membership, after a very conscientious process of discussion and calculating possible consequences to both sides."

*CTSWF leader, Siem Reap town*

II.C.3. Civil society networking and alliance-building

104. Although in the last decade impressive efforts have been made to develop CSO information sharing and networking at all levels, the effectiveness and impact of these networks remains limited. Only a few networks operating at national level (such as CCC, NGO Forum, Star Kampuchea, MEDiCAM and NEP) have managed to develop well-organized systems and structures for regular information exchange and coordination. Provincial level networks are more nascent and, in many cases, struggling with very limited (financial and technical) support. Field interviews in four provinces found that most network member organizations have little sense of shared identity or common purpose and therefore don’t always clearly see the benefits of coordination and collaboration. As described in Box 9, weak and informal management practices and the personalization (v. institutionalization) of leadership roles as well as feelings of competition/rivalry between CSOs (e.g. in attracting donor funds) also pose...
important challenges for effective networking/coalition-building. In several provinces, the research team found examples where CSO networks have been rendered inactive or dysfunctional due to the departure of a trusted leader or the inability of members to collectively make decisions or resolve problems. Research found that in the case of problems or differences of opinion, members were much more likely to simply withdraw from network activities rather than seek to discuss and resolve disagreements.

**Box 9 – K-NAN – The NGO Advocacy Network in Kompong Cham**

Created just prior to the 1998 national elections, K-NAN is one of the oldest and best-known NGO networks in Cambodia. In 1999, the founding members drafted its policy, statute & regulations and elected a coordinating committee. The Phnom Penh-based NGO, Star Kampuchea, provided start-up funds and continues to provide financial and technical support. The founding coordinator of the network (the provincial coordinator of ADHOC) played a crucial role. Members appreciated his organizational skills, transparency and honesty regarding financial management and efforts to consult with and involve all network members. His ability to cultivate personal contacts across all strata of society enabled K-NAN to negotiate successfully with local authorities, including the police and military, on serious land conflicts in the area and to prevent large-scale evictions of affected villagers. However when, after several terms, a new coordinator was named, the network had difficulty sustaining its membership and activities. Interviewees reported dissatisfaction among some network members about how the leadership transition was managed and the new management style. Communications and information-sharing became irregular and some members began to (privately) question program and resource use decisions. Some (of the 20 or so) member NGOs were reportedly excluded from some activities and frictions began to emerge. Instead of openly raising and discussing problems in official meetings of the network and trying to resolve them (according to established procedures), members have tended to either remain silent, scale back their involvement or leave the network (for example, on the pretext of being too busy). Consequently, only a few members are currently actively engaged in network activities. One interviewee regretted that “The resignation of a number of NGOs from K-NAN has weakened the network as an effective force to negotiate with public authorities”.

*Source: CAS/WB, 2007b*

105. At commune level, links between and among CBOs and CSOs are also very limited and these groups often face even more pronounced capacity and resource constraints. Research, however, found some successful and promising examples of network-building at local level. In Kompong Thom province, for example, the GTZ-supported “village networks” project seeks to build relationships both among CBOs and between CBOs and local authorities. As described in Box 10, it has achieved some encouraging results in terms of improved communication, enhanced mutual understanding and increased willingness to work together. CEDAC is also pursuing a promising approach by encouraging farmers’ associations to build systematic links for exchange of information and experience with one another. Through mutual exchanges and study tours into other provinces, association members and leaders are able to learn from each other and identify and discuss common concerns. In addition, successful associations have begun to approach interested farmers in other villages/communes in order to share information, knowledge and experience and encourage association building across the commune. In some communes, (for example, Ang Tasaom commune, Tramkok district in the province of Takeo) clusters of several village associations have begun to play an important role in strengthening associational life at the commune level and interacting with local authorities. This is, however, a long-term process as CBOs must gain experience and self-confidence in managing and sustaining their groups autonomously and independently from permanent external funding.
**Box 10 – GTZ-supported “Village Networks” project**

For a number of years, NGOs in Kompong Thom province have received support from GTZ to work with traditional associations, linking them to “village networks” in order to promote more concerted interaction with local authorities. These networks have served to enhance information exchange and, in some cases, collaboration between CBOs and local authorities but still face important challenges in developing their management capacities and self-sustainability beyond NGO support. In addition to informing commune councils about the priority needs and concerns of local populations, the village networks are also committed to building the knowledge and capacity of community members and to mobilizing them to participate in the commune council planning process. Interviewees often agreed that although there are still problems in sustaining active participation of villagers and systematic interaction with local authorities, the village networks have proven to be an important channel to voice needs, concerns and requests to public officials, who in turn acknowledge that they now feel better informed of what is going on in their villages. The chief of Roung Roeung commune, for example, acknowledged that after repeated discussions and continuous facilitation support from local NGOs, constructive and mutually beneficial links have been established with traditional associations via the local pagoda coordination committee (PaCoCo) and village network. Network representatives and association leaders confirmed that, in the past, nobody from the villages was invited to commune bidding processes for development activities but, since 2005 village elders and association leaders are always invited to participate even if the project is conducted by the provincial authority. Through the village network, villagers and association leaders feel more confident to voice disagreements and to request the intervention of local authorities when necessary. In Dang Kambet commune, for example, villagers who were dissatisfied with the quality of a road construction project, communicated their concerns to the commune council, via the village network and, as a result, local authorities were able to negotiate improvements with the contractor.

*Source: CAS/WB, 2007b*

II.C.4. **Recommendations and proposed actions**

106. Association among citizens is the foundation of civil society and a basic building block of social accountability. Research revealed low levels of citizen mobilization/association as a fundamental weakness in contemporary Cambodia and identified weak trust/social capital as a key influencing factor. Donors have only quite recently begun to channel support to grassroots associations – and this almost exclusively through intermediary NGOs, only a limited number of which have the requisite grassroots linkages, on-the-ground presence and skills. From a social accountability perspective, CSOs have an important role to play not only in holding government accountable but also in providing a model of what transparent, responsive, participatory and accountable governance looks like. Research found that, unfortunately, CSOs at all levels tend to mirror the same governance problems found in government and lack effectiveness in forming alliances and working together (especially at sub-national levels).

107. Three recommendations are proposed to address these fundamental issues. A first recommendation (mainly addressed to CSOs, CSO support organizations, DPs and research institutions) is to **(i) promote and support the emergence of grassroots-level citizen associations** (especially those that include women, youth and poorer people) on the basis of locally adapted (interest-based) approaches and promote the creation of necessary space and conditions for enhanced associations at local level. A second recommendation (mainly addressed to CSOs, CSO networks, support organizations and DPs) is to **(ii) assist and support CSOs (at all levels) to become models of transparent, responsive and accountable governance.** A third recommendation is for CSOs (with the assistance of CSO networks, support organizations and DPs) to **(iii) develop more effective mechanisms and processes of information sharing, networking and coalition-building.**
108. **Recommendation C.1 – Support the emergence of grassroots-level citizen associations.** *(Action required by grassroots and national CSOs and relevant specialists and researchers with support from DPs).*

a) Bring together a group of grassroots representatives and leaders with relevant practitioners, specialists and intellectuals to collectively reflect on underlying reasons for lack of grassroots association in Cambodia and brainstorm on what actions would facilitate association among Cambodian citizens.

b) Study and assess existing initiatives (such as CEDAC farmers’ associations, ADHOC communities, local labor unions and village networks) to identify lessons about which approaches are most successful/sustainable. (Initial lessons point to the success of “interest-based” over “concept-based” approaches, the usefulness/necessity of linking economic and political empowerment and, the need for long-term engagement and ongoing accompaniment.) This should include purposeful, result-oriented discussions of strategies on how to apply these experiences.

c) Based on these lessons, explore mechanisms for channeling more support and resources to CBOs and CSOs that work directly on empowerment at the grassroots level (or have strong potential to do so) and to initiatives that aim to create the necessary space and conditions for enhanced association at local level. This includes, for government and donors, encouraging and enabling CSOs/CBOs to participate in project design and formulation of development strategies, since this would greatly strengthen their sense of ownership and confidence. To permit such increased grassroots level participation, it would help if donors simplify their procedures for providing funding (e.g. project proposals, application forms, reporting procedures etc.). CBOs often find it difficult to cope with language barriers, and often have weak organizational capacity. Professional NGOs should play an important role in facilitating grassroots organizations’ access to external funding.

109. **Recommendation C.2 – Support CSOs to become models of transparent, responsive and accountable governance.**

a) Support ongoing efforts by Cambodian CSOs (such as those led by CCC) to establish a common code of ethics and a system of self-regulation.

b) Support organizational development and capacity-building initiatives aimed at improving the internal governance and management practices of CSOs (including mechanisms of public transparency and “downwards” accountability). This includes helping and encouraging CSOs (including NGOs) to strengthen their leadership, using democratic and participatory principles of governance that emphasize the CSO’s role of serving citizens through faithful representation of their concerns and priorities. This may entail rethinking the role and mandate of the Board of Directors as well as of the executive director.

c) To sustain efforts in improving their internal governance and sense of ownership, CSOs (and especially professional NGOs) should rigorously explore domestic financing opportunities, to reduce dependency on foreign funding (e.g. mobilizing donations from the Cambodian middle class, or charging for services).

d) Donors must “practice what they preach” and “set an example” by enhancing their own social accountability practices (i.e. ensuring that the projects and programs they fund include effective mechanisms of client responsiveness, transparency, public reporting and “downwards” accountability to clients/citizens) and by encouraging/requiring partners (in government and civil society) to respond and account to citizens/clients rather than emphasizing “upwards” responsiveness and accountability to donors.41 Donors should also be open and responsive to CSO efforts to monitor and evaluate their activities/performance.

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41 For example, a range of donors (including the World Bank, ADB, UNDP, DfID, DANIDA, TAF) are currently channeling funds to support activities at commune level. Such programs represent important opportunities to build ownership and active oversight by citizens by ensuring transparency and introducing systems of “downwards” accountability.
110. **Recommendation C.3 – Support and facilitate more effective information-sharing, networking and coalition-building among CSOs.**

a) Support processes to allow CSOs (especially those at sub-national levels) to collectively analyze and reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of current information-sharing, networking and coalition-building practices as well as strategies for improving these practices. Stronger channels are particularly needed to link CBOs and CSOs at sub-national levels with effective national-level advocacy organizations. This would enable the latter to be more confident about the constituencies their advocacy represents.

b) Support opportunities for CSO leaders and staff (again, especially those at sub-national levels) to learn about best practices in this area and to experiment with new approaches and techniques in information-sharing, networking and coalition-building.

c) Resource and support both new and existing networks and coalitions that are active (at both national and sub-national levels) as well as emerging networks in the area of social accountability. In particular, strengthen and develop province-level CSO networks; linkages among associations and groups at the grassroots/local level and between grassroots-level groups and CSOs working at higher (district, province, national) level. It is especially desirable to link evidence gathered by CSOs at the local level (for example, through processes of participatory needs assessment, opinion polling and participatory M&E of public services) to processes of negotiation and advocacy at provincial and national levels.

II.D. **CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE & PARTICIPATION**

111. A final and crucial element of social accountability is the ability of citizens and CSOs to engage in constructive dialogue with state actors and to participate meaningfully in processes of public deliberation and decision-making. The ultimate goal of social accountability is not only to enhance citizen information and voice but to elicit a response from public officials and actions that enhance government effectiveness and accountability. In order to influence government decisions and actions, CSOs often rely on unilateral strategies of criticism, persuasion and pressure - such as, advocacy, lobbying, public demonstration, protests or denouncements. The chances of effecting real change are much greater, however, when citizens and CSOs can interact directly with government counterparts and engage in genuine dialogue. Just as public-private partnerships between the Government and the private sector allows the Government to finance economic projects that it could not afford from public funds alone, so cooperation between the Government and civil society can help to ensure that social and economic policies are better designed, accepted by citizens, and more effectively implemented than if the Government had to rely only on bureaucratic capacities and official channels of communication. Opportunities and mechanisms for citizen-state dialogue and citizen participation are slowly growing in Cambodia but still limited in scope and effectiveness. International experience (e.g. Public Affairs Foundation, 2007; McNeil and Mumvuma, 2006; Malena et. al., 2007) shows that processes of dialogue and participation are most effective when they: i) **are supported by an enabling policy environment based on a shared understanding of citizen/CSO rights;** ii) **are constructive, realistic, evidence-based and solution-oriented;** iii) **build on and reinforce existing systems and mechanisms for accountability, and;** iv) **involve direct, sustained interaction and dialogue.**

II.D.1 **Creating an enabling environment and institutionalizing citizen/CSO rights**

112. Qualitative research revealed **limited awareness or understanding of notions of citizen rights and responsibilities, both on the part of government officials and citizens themselves.** Regarding social accountability, fundamental principles regarding the rights (and corresponding responsibilities) of citizens to be informed about government decisions and activities, to provide feedback on government performance, to make claims regarding legitimate entitlements and to seek accountability do not appear to be broadly acknowledged nor reflected in current government policies, regulations or rules. Given this lack of affirmation of citizen rights and responsibilities, and the prevailing context of paternalistic and patronage-based state-citizen relations, ordinary citizens have very low expectations that authorities would
consider their requests, let alone entertain their “claims” or attempts to influence decisions or seek accountability. If the gravity of the matter leaves no choice but to contact authorities, then the sense of being at the authorities’ mercy typically prompts citizens to adopt a submissive stance and to make a “plea”, if possible through an intermediary, rather than to make a “claim”, on the basis of evidence and institutionalized rights.

113. Research also revealed a lack of consensus regarding what constitutes legitimate and “appropriate” roles for civil society. While state actors seem to acknowledge and appreciate the important social role of “service delivery” and welfare-oriented CSOs, they are less willing to accept the legitimacy of more rights-based, advocacy-oriented CSO activities. Advocacy efforts (often seeking to address perceived shortcomings or illegitimate actions on the part of the government) are frequently interpreted by the government as a direct attack on their authority and labeled as illegitimate “opposition” to the government. According to Un (2004:258), this results in a situation where “the government does not recognize the legitimacy of NGOs, and the latter do not consider the former as fully legitimized…we [NGOs] and the government seem to look down on each other”. For many in government, this mind-set results in the drawing of a clear line between ‘good' NGOs (that seek to assist and cooperate with government) and ‘bad’ NGOs (that only criticize or confront). According to interviews with CSO practitioners, this split is even experienced within civil society, with some individuals/groups feeling compelled to distance themselves from “trouble-making” organizations and some “advocacy” NGOs being criticized or ostracized by their peers if they are perceived as being overly conciliatory or collaborative.

II.D.2 From “advocacy” to constructive dialogue

114. Due to the above-described contextual factors, much “advocacy” work in Cambodia has been quite confrontational in nature – based on publicly criticizing government and “forcing” a response. According to Un (2004:243) **advocacy has widely become understood as criticizing and attacking the government.** (v. providing constructive feedback or appealing for joint action on issues of public interest). Most advocacy activities in Cambodia have focused on highly politicized and emotionally charged issues such as human rights violations and land evictions. Because such activities are perceived as entailing a high level of risk, they are mainly undertaken by Phnom Penh-based NGOs who enjoy the “protection” of international support. Ordinary citizens and local and sub-national CSOs are understandably quite averse to such confrontational approaches and will generally only become engaged when there are severe threats and they see no alternative. Current advocacy efforts are perceived as relying heavily on the influence of external donors (both in terms of crafting strategies and creating pressure on government) in contrast, for example, to “citizen-based” advocacy approaches that seek to aggregate and amplify citizen voice and public pressure through a combination of citizen education, mobilization and empowerment strategies.

115. Such advocacy approaches have, in some notable cases, been successful in achieving redress for specific violations of rights – for example, in the area of land rights. Overall however, as shown in Figure 21, according to survey results and qualitative findings, a majority of civil society actors engaged in advocacy assess their impact as being “limited”, especially with regard to influencing concrete

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42 For example, the leader of a womens’ group of a (CEDAC supported) farmers association in Kompong Cham province, (Choeung Prey district) stated “If problems exist in the village, my group or the farmers association is trying to solve the problem by itself. We usually do not consider taking these issues to authorities for helping us to solve.”

43 NGO networks, in particular, have had to deal with this challenge. Disagreements over being ‘pro-governmental’ was, for example, reportedly a reason that some human rights/advocacy NGOs left the provincial NGO network in Kompong Thom. Similarly, since NGO Forum has intensified efforts to come into dialogue with top level officials some member NGOs have expressed fears that this is “playing into the hands of government” running the risk of losing its independent and critical edge.
activities such as policy implementation, budgeting and expenditures, and feel that they have not succeeded in bringing about broad-based impacts or structural reforms. As described in Box 11, due to their confrontational and crisis-focused nature, advocacy initiatives in Cambodia have seldom succeeded in expanding public space for dialogue or encouraging public authorities to interact more systematically or constructively with civil society actors. To the contrary, practitioners lament that advocacy efforts have often met with government resistance (v. the desired responsiveness) and have tended to result in increased tension and mutual distrust between the civil society and state actors involved. Even in those cases where advocacy activities have met with some success in defending citizen rights (for example, preventing evictions from agricultural land) the result has often been a serious deterioration in citizen-state relations - due to lingering antagonism and feelings of “loss of face” and “humiliation” on the part of the “loser”. (J4P, 2006:32-33) As shown in Figure 22, according to survey results, NGOs regard “lack of political will” as the single most important constraint to social accountability activities, and also identify “tense relations between civil society and the government” as an important constraint.

Figure 22– NGOs’ perceived levels of influence on governance processes

![Figure 22](image_url)

Source: CAS/WB, 2007a

Box 11 – The difficulty of transforming “social moments” into “social movements”

The well-known NGO, ADHOC, has helped citizens collectively defend their rights through the formation of 28 commune-based citizen associations or “communities” in 14 provinces of Cambodia. In 2005, for example, the NGO facilitated the creation of an association of residents from several villages embroiled in a fierce land conflict with officials of the Ministry of Agriculture who had ordered their eviction from the land they rely on for their livelihood. In the face of the villagers’ collective resistance, the government suspended eviction threats but did not grant titles for the disputed land. Although the immediate crisis has passed, the dispute has not been resolved and feelings of suspicion and distrust between villagers and public authorities remain. Under these circumstances, it has proved difficult to sustain popular mobilization or collective action. Association members do not attend meetings of the commune council because they do not feel they will be listened to and are not convinced that the commune chief could help the situation even if he tried. Leaders of the association believe that local authorities tolerate their group only because of the influence and pressure of ADHOC. Local authorities suspect the association of being
an agent of the opposition party and of seeking to incite people against the government. Due to mutual distrust and tense relations with local authorities, efforts by association leaders to tackle other problems and issues (such as repairing and seeking communal management of a small hydro-power station, initially built with donor support but now defunct and under the responsibility of the provincial department of mines and energy) have been fruitless. As a result, villagers lack confidence in the association and its ability to achieve results or make a difference. Although the association was successful in mobilizing villagers and preventing (for now) the loss of the land they were using, it has proved difficult to keep people together and to maintain motivation for collective interaction with authorities now that the initial crisis has passed. This example also indicates that in the context of serious collective conflicts with authorities there is little public space at village/commune-level for voicing disagreements or influencing decision-making, especially when these have been made at higher levels of government.

Source: CAS/WB, 2007b

Figure 23– NGOs’ perceived constraints to achieving effective social accountability initiatives

![Figure 23: NGOs’ perceived constraints to achieving effective social accountability initiatives in Cambodia](image)

### Major constraints to achieving effective SA initiatives in Cambodia

- **Lack of political will**: 61.4%
- **Insufficient access to information**: 59.5%
- **Insufficient freedom of expression**: 51%
- **Tense relations between civil society & government**: 43.1%
- **Weak CSO capacity**: 17%

Source: CAS/WB, 2007a

116. In Cambodia there is currently a large gap between apolitical and unquestioning (service delivery-oriented) organizations at one end of the spectrum and “attacking” (advocacy-oriented) CSOs at the other end. Social accountability approaches offer rich opportunity both to expand and strengthen advocacy activities and to fill in the “middle ground” of the spectrum with activities that seek to interact with (and even question, criticize and challenge) state actors but in a manner that is constructive, realistic, evidence-based and solution-oriented. At the present time, there are only limited examples of attempts at such forms of interaction between citizens/CS and the state. As shown in Figure 23, when Cambodian NGOs were asked to indicate the types of social accountability activities they have undertaken to date, “advocacy” was by far the most common response. Only a very small number of organizations indicated they had experimented or were involved in other (more evidence/performance-based, dialogue/negotiation-oriented) approaches such as supporting civic engagement with commune councils (10%), tracking public expenditures (3%) or engaging on budget issues (1.6%).

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44 This information is drawn from a FGD with community leadership and interviews with a commune council member and village chief.
Global experience shows that social accountability approaches can help government be more effective and accountable while at the same time contributing to improved relations between civil society and state actors. (e.g. Public Affairs Foundation, 2007; Malena et. al., 2004) In the Cambodian context, moving beyond unilateral and confrontational advocacy approaches to develop possibilities for constructive dialogue and participation is an important challenge. First, such a development challenges both CSOs and government officials to adopt a constructive attitude and to be willing to interact with one another despite important conflicts and differences of opinion and despite feelings of suspicion and distrust. It challenges CSOs to always back up arguments and claims with hard evidence and to try to propose solutions rather than just point out problems. To evolve from pure confrontation to more professional and constructive engagement, the use of diversified and well-balanced strategies becomes a priority. As a representative from NGO Forum stated, “It is more useful to refer to research and carefully gathered information than just to accuse the government out of emotions. Without evidence, it is easy for officials to deny everything.”

Gathering and analyzing data, formulating solid arguments and proposing realistic solutions require a high level of knowledge and skills. Respondents to the NGO survey admitted that such capacities are currently somewhat limited. As shown in Figure 24, they identified (i) skills training and (ii) more information about practical methods and tools as priority strategies for enhancing their capacity to promote and practice social accountability. Groups with specialized knowledge and expertise, such as think tanks, research institutes, universities, professional associations, trade unions and media associations have an important role to play in partnering with CSOs to “fill the middle ground” by engaging in constructive debate, dialogue and working relationships with government.
II.D.3. Enhancing the effectiveness of existing accountability mechanisms through civic engagement

119. In recent years, the government of Cambodia has introduced a number of mechanisms aimed at facilitating citizen participation and accountability - including commune councils, attempts to deconcentrate public service delivery, school support committees, provincial accountability committees (and “accountability boxes”) and pilot ombudsmen offices (located in One Window Service Offices in two districts). While some of the very promising emerging relationships and dynamics between citizens and commune councils have already been discussed, research generally found citizen/CSO knowledge and use of existing accountability mechanisms to be extremely limited. Even professional NGOs have paid little attention to government accountability mechanisms so far - even though these aim, in theory, to engage civil society actors in efforts to enhance the effectiveness of public sector performance and service delivery. Interviews found that CSOs (especially advocacy and human rights NGOs) have fundamental reservations about becoming involved in initiatives or mechanisms introduced by the state for fear of being “absorbed”, “neutralized” or “co-opted”.  

120. Decentralized government structures - Quite encouraging levels of citizen information about commune councils and significant levels of citizen participation (albeit passive and unorganized) in commune council meeting have already been discussed. Although nascent and fragile, these emerging relationships and dynamics suggest good potential for the gradual development of commune councils as mechanisms of civic engagement and social accountability. Especially where NGOs (through programs like CCSP, see Box 12) have given support and facilitated interaction, field research found promising evidence of strengthened citizen-state relations and fruitful cooperation developing. In Kompong Thom, for example, several interviewees reported that following training, capacity-building and facilitation efforts by NGOs, communication between local authorities and community associations has improved and association leaders feel able to articulate feedback and requests related to government performance. However, qualitative research also found that engagement is still largely limited to sporadic “appeals” and “requests” that are quickly and quietly abandoned if they meet with a negative

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45 The provincial coordinator of one leading NGO in Siem Reap province, for example, explained that, since the mandate of her organization is to defend people whose rights have been violated by public officials, it is impossible for her to ‘participate’ in state initiatives.

46 Practitioners involved in commune council capacity building initiatives also reported that councilors are generally very positive and enthusiastic about learning/using participatory techniques that allow them to engage with citizens.
response. Nevertheless, the overall opinion of citizens with regard to the performance and responsiveness of the commune councils is quite encouraging. As shown in Figure 25, when asked whether the responsiveness of commune authority has improved after the first (2002) commune-level elections (compared to the situation when the commune chief was appointed), a majority of survey respondents (54%) gave a positive reply. A 2004 survey also found that commune councils are more trusted than the provincial and national levels of government and that their (first two years of) performance is viewed quite positively. Voters, as well as commune councilors themselves, felt that commune administration has improved since the commune council elections. (TAF, Commune Councils in Cambodia, 2005:18-20)

121. While perhaps the most significant role of commune councils is as a representative of “the people” vis-à-vis central government, only a few commune councilors have had the self-confidence to stand up for commune decisions against higher levels of authority. Commune councilors also report feeling constrained in their ability to respond to the expressed needs of their constituents due to their limited authority and resources and directives imposed by higher level government or party officials. Research also found that citizens are aware of the limited influence of commune councilors vis-à-vis central government authorities.

Box 12 – The Commune Council Support Project (CCSP)

The Commune Council Support Project (CCSP) was established in 2000 as a joint initiative of nine national and international NGOs: Buddhism for Development, Church World Service, CIDSE, COMFREL, Concern Worldwide, NGO Forum, Oxfam GB, SEDOC and World Vision Cambodia. CCSP advocates for equal participation of women and men in local governance reforms in favor of poor people; works to increase civil society understanding of the implications of decentralization; and builds the capacity of both civil society organizations and NGOs for engagement with state bodies. Aside from information dissemination, CCSP has programs in capacity-building, policy advocacy and sustaining state-civil society collaboration. CCSP has networks in all 24 provinces and is the initiator of the NGO Liaison Office within the Cambodian Ministry of the Interior. CCSP is also known for its awards program, which highlights initiatives in citizen empowerment, civil society-commune council partnerships, and transparency and accountability at the local level.

Source: http://www.ipd.ph/CPLG/partners/partners.html

Figure 26– Perceived improvements in the responsiveness of the commune authorities

![Chart showing perceived improvements in the responsiveness of the commune authorities](http://www.ipd.ph/CPLG/partners/partners.html)

Source: CAS/WB, 2007
122. Current process of decentralization and deconcentration also create important (and, as yet, largely undeveloped) opportunities for citizens and CSOs to engage with government authorities and public service providers at the district and provincial levels. One example of grassroots associations engaging with district and provincial health care providers is described in Box 4. There is considerable scope to expand such forms of citizen engagement with other sub-national government structures (for example, in the sectors of education, agriculture, land and natural resource management).

123. School support committees (SSC) – Community involvement in school issues has long existed in Cambodia - often in the form of traditional school associations (linked to the pagoda) that raise funds for maintaining school buildings and supporting teachers. In order to rebuild the education sector after its destruction by the Khmer Rouge, the government officially encouraged citizen and community involvement by instructing all public schools to create school support committees (initially called “parents associations”). These committees are theoretically open to every citizen who is interested in education affairs and have recently been mandated to monitor and ensure that the annual budget allocated to schools by the MoEYS (under the Priority Action Programme or PAP) is properly managed. Research, however, found that although SSCs themselves are widely known, the status and mandate of these committees are not clear to people and are handled by school directors in different ways according to the specific local context. As shown in Figure 26, according to the public opinion poll, most people who are aware of SSCs admit to knowing little or nothing about the intended purpose and function of the committees (including the fact that they are mandated to monitor the school budget). Parents’ involvement in education issues appears to be mostly limited to responding to sporadic requests for financial contributions (e.g. for maintaining school infrastructure) and seldom involves any active relationship to the school supporting committee (e.g. in terms of asking questions concerning the school budget or accountability of the SSC or school director). A recent education sector Public Expenditure Tracking Survey (PETS) conducted by the World Bank (WB 2005), for example, found that only 9% of parents are aware of the PAP. The survey also found that though SSCs are supposed to represent the community, effective parental representation is limited.

Figure 27– Citizen knowledge about school support committees

% of people aware of school support committees

- Awareness of the existence of school supporting committees: 54.9%
- Significant knowledge on the school supporting committee’s work: 17%

Source: CAS/WB, 2007
124. Qualitative research found that even members of SSCs are frequently unaware of the mandate and powers of the committee. This finding is also backed up by the Education Sector PETS which found that while 83% of SSC members know what the PAP is, only 14% know the amount of the school’s entitlement and only 7% are aware of the spending guidelines. One example studied in Kompong Cham (Choeung Prey district) found that the SSC plays an active role in supervising renovation and construction work and even in judging students for scholarships, but has never been involved in school development planning or monitoring school expenditures, as this was seen as being “beyond their capacity”. It is believed that since the PAP money is coming from the ministry, it is the responsibility of the school director to account for the expenditures to the ministry. In addition, members who have little familiarity with the education sector often feel uncomfortable in meetings as the terms used in discussion are too technical and difficult to understand. They do not feel competent to monitor or even request information about school budgets. In Kompong Thom province, (Stoung district) the role of the SSC was similarly unclear, however, research found a very active group of villagers involved in school issues, emanating from traditional village school associations dating back to the 1950s. Although there is no formal membership, most villagers contribute to the school association but leave initiatives such as monitoring the PAP budget, completely to their leaders. Several school association leaders complained about the disinterest of people in being informed about the SSC’s work and school expenditures. “People have never asked to know how the PAP money is spent. They do not care about the budget because they rely on the leaders of the school association to take care of such things.” However, even for well-recognized school association leaders it is not easy to fulfill the mandate of monitoring the PAP budget or calling the school director to account for expenditures. A treasurer of one SSC in Stoung district (who is also member of the pagoda committee and the village network) reported that she and others find it difficult to request information about PAP expenditures from the school director even though they have the mandate to do so. School association members have never asked for a report because they fear that embarrassing the school director or signaling distrust would severely affect the relationship to him and cause difficulties for their children in the school. As described in Box 13, field interviews suggest that SSC involvement in budget monitoring depends largely on the willingness of the school director (to proactively share budget information) as well as on facilitating support from NGOs.

Box 13 – Experiences of a school association and SSC in Kompong Thom province

In Kompong Thom, school association leaders of one commune reported that in recent years they had enjoyed a very trusting relationship with the local school director, who regularly informed the community about all school issues. Thanks to the capacity building support of GTZ and local partner NGOs, school association leaders and SSC members began to play an active role in managing the use of PAP resources. The use of participatory decision-making and budget monitoring on the part of SSC provided the basis for obtaining additional resources from GTZ for further school-related activities. However, since the arrival of a new school director in 2006, neither the SSC nor the village school associations have received any information about the use of PAP resources. Committee members were also not invited to the school planning meeting for school year 2006-2007. Repeated informal requests made to the director for convening a meeting have remained unanswered and school association leaders feel discouraged by rumors that the PAP budget has been spent, although nobody knows on what. Because it is said that the new director enjoys close connections to the district education office, nobody in the villages dares to confront him openly. With NGO support, however, association leaders have started to discuss how to submit a complaint to the district education office, demanding transparency on PAP budget expenditures. They also are willing to demand that the school director reimburse last year’s budget if he cannot provide adequate evidence of how the money was spent.

Source: CAS/WB, 2007b
125. **Provincial accountability committees and accountability boxes** - In 2005 the Cambodian government introduced an accountability mechanism for citizens to ensure the appropriate use of commune council funds by distributing “accountability boxes” throughout the country in which concerned citizens can deposit anonymous complaints about the misuse of commune council funds or poor quality of projects. However, research found citizen knowledge and usage of this accountability mechanism to be very low. According to the public opinion poll, 22% of respondents were aware of the existence of the boxes, but, only two individuals (0.2% of respondents) had actually used the box, with only one person reporting that his complaint was resolved. With regard to the provincial accountability committees that are responsible for collecting, investigating and addressing complaints received, less than 8% of respondents stated having heard about such committees and only 3% had an idea about their function.

126. Qualitative research suggests that citizens feel highly insecure in confronting authorities with criticisms or complaints and fear retribution from authority figures if they do so. Many interviewees expressed unease about not knowing by whom and in what context their complaints would be received and about having no possibility to clarify or justify their position. “People do not dare to use the accountability box because they do not feel safe and doubt that anonymity will be protected. However, some are brave enough to speak out the issues to authorities in a public forum.” (A Pagoda Committee Chief in Kompong Thom province). The widespread inexperience of rural Cambodians in making written statements and the inevitable involvement of third persons in the case of those who are illiterate further discourages making use of accountability boxes.

127. Qualitative research found that even among CSO leaders and professional NGO staff, knowledge about accountability boxes and provincial accountability committees is extremely limited. In all provinces studied, research found that committee members from civil society (usually from professional NGOs) are not sharing information with other NGOs, let alone with membership CSOs or CBOs or, as a recent evaluation also found, do not show up for respective committee meetings because of lack of incentives to attend and being occupied with core tasks of their own NGO (Knowles, 2007:22). An underlying reason of civil society’s restrained commitment appears to be anxiety or feeling of insecurity about their role on the committee. One CSO representative reported feeling “hopelessly outnumbered” and “highly unprotected” as the only civil society representative among thirteen government members and, therefore, avoided speaking up at committee meetings. In FGDs, it was suggested that provincial accountability committees could be made more effective by increasing civil society representation on the committees and by working with community, commune, district and province-level CSOs to establish relations with and support civil society committee representatives; inform citizens (and government officials) about the purpose and process of the accountability boxes and accountability committees; and facilitate and follow-up on citizens’ submissions (by individuals or groups) to the accountability box/committee. Increasing the number and physical accessibility of accountability boxes; expanding their mandate from complaints regarding the commune council budget to more general citizen concerns/complaints; and introducing clear procedures and mechanisms for feedback, follow-up and recourse would also contribute to making this mechanism more effective. CSO might also consider using accountability boxes as a mechanism for submitting group complaints, petitions or collective requests/proposals to provincial authorities.

128. **District ombudsmen** - Similarly, awareness and use of the services of district ombudsmen (located in pilot One Window Service Offices in two cities) was also found to be extremely limited, both in the case of citizens and CSO leaders, members and staff. NGO staff in Siem Reap province, for example, were uninformed and uninterested in the role of the ombudsman office. As discussed above,

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47 Levels of awareness did though vary significantly by gender and age, with men and younger people being better informed than women and older people.
civil society actors tend to view initiatives of the government with suspicion and have little conviction that they would ever work to benefit ordinary citizens. People who have used the OWSO in Siem Reap expressed satisfaction with getting service quickly and at low fees, but were seldom aware of the existence of the ombudsman’s office. The chief of the ombudsman office in Siem Reap explained that only few people use his service and that those complaints are rather minor (such as dissatisfaction with long waiting times or the unfriendly/arrogant behavior of OWSO employees). No complaint about unjust treatment or corrupt officials has ever been made. According to him, one reason for low use is that his office is located inside the OWSO, giving people the impression that he is a part of the local authority rather than an independent watchdog.\textsuperscript{48} As the government moves towards introducing district ombudsmen in a larger number of districts, it will be important to draw lessons from current pilot experiences and enhance the effectiveness of these potentially important citizen-state intermediaries by making greater efforts to inform citizens/CSOs about the role of district ombudsmen and how to access them; ensuring that ombudsmen receive the resources and support they need to offer quality services and exploring the possibility of linking the work of citizen advisors with that of district ombudsmen.

II.D.4. Expanding opportunities and mechanisms for dialogue and participation

129. Beyond these few examples of (largely unutilized) formal mechanisms of accountability, research found limited evidence or examples of alternative opportunities or mechanisms allowing citizens to interact and engage meaningfully with government authorities. Focus group discussions and field interviews found that villagers much prefer personalized (verbal) face-to-face interactions during which they can assess and influence the course of discussion and clarify, adjust or back down from their position depending on how it is received. Such direct and verbal forums have much more positive appeal than submitting written complaints to an accountability box, with no clear understanding of how and by whom it will be received and no possibility for further clarification or justification. There have been some positive and encouraging experiences with commune-level public forums - for example, those supported by NDI during commune elections which, in many cases, drew large crowds and active participation. Unfortunately such initiatives are rare, and typically occur at national or provincial level, rather than at the level of districts or communes where ordinary citizens have greater opportunity to participate. Examples of other, more targeted, participatory and in-depth forms of interaction (such as the use of facilitated participatory planning or budgeting processes, citizen’s juries, social audits or community scorecard techniques) are equally limited. Effective forums for regular or systematic dialogue between CSOs and government actors are also lacking, especially at provincial level. In both Kompong Cham and Kompong Thom, attempts to organize monthly exchanges between CSOs and provincial governors gradually petered out and eventually ceased to take place. It appears from field interviews that these “friendly chats” [sămneah sâmnl] were perceived only as courtesy meetings and failed to provide a forum for meaningful exchange and “negotiation”. In the absence of meaningful ongoing dialogue, interactions tend instead to be limited to dealing with sporadic conflicts and crises.

130. At the highest level of government forums for debating policy with key stakeholders have been established in which some representatives of national NGO networks (such as MEDiCAM, NEP or NGO Forum) are present. \textbf{There is an increasing number of meetings and consultations between ministries, donors and NGOs in which the government is expected to articulate policy goals, explain decision-making publicly, reveal information and take note of concerns articulated by NGOs and/or private sector actors.} These forums have gradually opened up some space (at least at the national level) for civil society to participate in processes of deliberation and decision-making and have created opportunities for constructive dialogue. However, some non-state actors who participate in such forums regret the perceived lack of follow-up and impact. Some participants in the biannual government-private sector forum, for

\textsuperscript{48} The district is currently considering separating the ombudsman office clearly from the OWSO.
example, reported that the government “accepts” recommendations made at the event but fails to act on them. It would help to have clear terms of engagement for such events and to ensure that key agreements are publicly disseminated in official “prakas” to ensure subsequent implementation. A system for tracking subsequent implementation and follow-up would also be useful. Increasing involvement in high-level consultations and dialogue also makes high demands on civil society's professional competence and specific knowledge on governance issues including administrative, legal and judicial procedures. This remains a challenge to many NGOs and ongoing learning and capacity-building is required to ensure meaningful and fruitful dialogue and participation.

II.D.5. Recommendations and proposed actions

131. Research found limited current evidence of constructive dialogue and meaningful citizen participation, but identified several promising possibilities for developing such forms of engagement. Constructive engagement requires an enabling policy environment (based on a shared understanding of citizen/CSO rights and responsibilities), a willingness on the part of both government and civil society actors to interact with one another in a constructive manner, the existence of mechanisms for civic engagement and accountability, and the capacities and skills to use these effectively. Research revealed challenges and opportunities with regard to each of these factors.

132. Three recommendations are proposed. A first recommendation (primarily targeting government actors and DPs) is to (i) create/support an enabling environment for constructive dialogue and citizen/CSO participation, based on a clear and shared understanding of respective rights and responsibilities. A second recommendation (targeting mainly CSOs and donors and also, ideally, receiving support from government) is to (ii) promote and support the use of facilitation and social accountability tools to make existing mechanisms of dialogue and participation (such as commune councils and school support committees) more effective. A final recommendation is to (iii) create new opportunities and mechanisms for direct and regular dialogue and “negotiation” between citizens and the state (at all levels).

133. Recommendation D.1 – Create/support an enabling policy environment for constructive dialogue and citizen/CSO participation. (Action required by the government with the active involvement of CSOs and the support of DPs).

a) initiate a facilitated process bringing together key actors from both government and civil society to build consensus on fundamental principles of social accountability and the respective rights and responsibilities of citizens, CSOs and state actors. Such processes should be convened and facilitated by a trusted, “neutral” intermediary, and supported by DPs.
b) On the basis on these agreed principles, create a task force made up of identified “champions” of social accountability (from government and civil society) to propose policy reforms and institutional rules aimed at promoting more effective citizen information, voice, association and constructive dialogue and participation in governance processes.
c) Explore and develop mechanisms whereby major issues/disagreements/complaints raised by civil society actors can be aired and arbitrated. At the national level, for example, the role of the NGO Liaison Office might be developed in this sense. At the sub-national level, the district and provincial level councils soon to be created under the new Organic Law might also be designed and charged to play such a role.

134. Recommendation D.2 - Promote and support the use of facilitation and social accountability tools to make existing mechanisms of dialogue and participation (such as commune councils and school support committees,) more effective.

a) Encourage and support CBOs/CSOs to develop their “bridging” role as facilitators/intermediaries between citizens and authorities, for example by offering community/civil society leaders training and coaching in basic facilitation/mediation techniques.
b) Provide training and capacity-building in social accountability approaches and tools. Create opportunities for Cambodian practitioners and activists to learn about, adapt and experiment with the broad range of social accountability strategies that have been tried, tested and proved successful both in Cambodia and other countries in Asia and across the world – especially those that are evidence-based, solution-oriented (v. problem-based), based on direct dialogue/interaction and aim to build confidence and trust between state and civil society actors. International donors and NGOs can contribute here by sharing other global best practices.\(^{49}\) It is particularly important to share evidence of the impacts and benefits of such approaches with government actors, citizens and stakeholders – underlining the concrete advantages for citizens (in terms of improved services and well-being) as well as political incentives for government (such as enhanced credibility and public popularity).

c) Make commune councils a more effective platform for citizen participation by using third party facilitators; encouraging/supporting citizens to engage with commune councils in a prepared and organized manner (e.g. meeting to discuss key issues and requests prior to attending commune council meetings), and; making use of social accountability tools and techniques (such as participatory evaluations of public services, citizen report cards, etc.). Practical considerations - like making meeting agendas publicly available, respecting scheduled meeting times, rotating the location (and themes) of meetings, encouraging (and allowing ample time for) citizen inputs, choosing accessible venues and times and paying attention to “participation-friendly” seating arrangements - can also go a long way towards enhancing the effectiveness of meetings.

d) Seek ways to render existing school support committees (SSCs) more effective mechanisms of social accountability, for example by: providing training (and follow-up support) to leading members of SSCs in facilitation and social accountability techniques; supporting efforts by SSCs to utilize social accountability methods (such as “school scorecards” and expenditure tracking techniques), and; organizing annual (or biannual) public forums to present and discuss the school budget. \(^{135}\)  

**135. Recommendation D.3 – Introduce new opportunities and mechanisms for direct and regular dialogue and “negotiation” between citizens and the state (at all levels).**

a) Encourage (or instruct) commune councils to organize regular facilitated public forums at which citizens have the opportunity to meet face-to-face, ask questions and receive direct responses from state representatives (such as commune councilors, public service administrators and staff, provincial governors, members of parliament and central government representatives). It is recommended that commune councils receive specific funding for this, and to enhance their capacity to facilitate these public forums and then respond to the concerns and questions raised, including by referring them to the (newly created) district/provincial council if necessary. Individual forums could either focus on specific issues of priority concern (such as health, education, poverty reduction, agriculture, land, forests, fisheries, water and extractive industries) or target specific social groups (such as women, youth, farmers, people living with disabilities, etc.). Ideally, the location of these events should rotate between villages and local CBOs/CSOs should be involved in preparation, facilitation and follow-up. Commune councils should also be encouraged/supported to experiment with mechanisms such as popular referenda, opinion polling, public hearings and citizen juries in order to find out citizens opinions, needs and preferences. \(^{49}\)  

b) Explore and develop the role of commune councils in representing people’s concerns to central government and holding central government accountable on behalf of citizens. It is recommended, for example, to introduce mechanisms for commune councils to express satisfaction/dissatisfaction with public services to relevant provincial departments and for central ministries to introduce mechanisms to incorporate feedback from commune councils (and CBOS and CSOs) into their processes of monitoring

\(^{49}\) For example, this is the purpose of the World Bank’s Program to Enhance Capacity in Social Accountability, and also of the Civil Society and Pro-Poor Market Program funded by DFID/DANIDA.
and evaluation. The district ombudsmen (who are expected to increase greatly in number in the near future) could provide valuable assistance in facilitating this. (Action required by: MoI, commune councils, CSOs, district ombudsmen, DPs CSO support organizations and DPs)

c) Explore possibilities for introducing new institutionalized mechanisms of citizen feedback, oversight and negotiation in sectors of key public interest and importance. For example, district and provincial councils established under the new Organic Law should be designed to include citizen feedback and oversight. CSOs should help open the way for meaningful participation in these newly created councils including by suggesting appropriate provisions for incorporation into the law. Annual public forums of these councils would also strengthen citizens-state relations and ensure that authorities are better informed about the needs and concerns of citizens. At national level, key ministries should be encouraged to establish advisory groups (with civil society and private sector representatives) and to systematically ensure facilitated consultation on major new laws/policies. Particularly important is to introduce mechanisms to ensure open and effective public oversight of the management of public revenues from extractive industries (i.e. oil, gas and minerals). (Action required by government)

d) In order to build mutual confidence and trust create more opportunities for government and civil society actors to meet face-to-face in both formal and informal settings; organize field visits for government actors to see NGO activities/achievements on the ground; invite civil society and government actors to participate jointly in training events, study tours and exchange visits; introduce mechanisms for regular mutual information-sharing (e.g. systematic exchange of documents, reports and updates between sectoral specialists from government and civil society); encourage government specialists to organize training/learning sessions for CSOs (on the content of laws, policies, budgets, programs, etc.) and, vice versa, encourage government representatives to participate actively in CSO-initiated meetings and workshops. Staff exchanges or temporary “secondments” between government departments and CSOs might be another creative way to build mutual understanding and trust between civil society and government counterparts. (Action required by government and CSOs with support from DPs)
III. STRENGTHENING SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN CAMBODIA

III.A. CONCLUSIONS

136. Fighting corruption and enhancing government accountability in Cambodia are key priorities. Strong public accountability is a crucial ingredient in achieving key goals of good governance, effective public service delivery, sustainable development and citizen empowerment. In addition to ongoing efforts to strengthen “internal” (supply-side) mechanisms of accountability and good governance, it is crucially important to enhance and expand “external” (demand-side) mechanisms of social accountability.

137. There are many weak links in the chain connecting citizens to government and many challenges relating to underlying political, socio-cultural factors, but also many important opportunities. Initial experimentation with social accountability approaches (including independent policy analysis, applied budget work, participatory monitoring and evaluation, advocacy and citizen-state dialogue) have served both to demonstrate the strong potential of social accountability practices and to reveal limitations and obstacles that currently impede their success and impact. This study has proposed numerous recommendations targeting government, civil society and development partner stakeholders and aimed at creating a more enabling environment for social accountability in Cambodia, developing necessary capacities and skills (within both civil society and government), and; expanding and institutionalizing spaces and mechanisms for citizen-state dialogue and negotiation. The report has also emphasized the timeliness of fostering a culture of “downwards accountability” at all levels and attitudinal and behavioral changes on the part of all key stakeholders. For example, government actors are challenged to be more open and tolerant of criticisms and alternative viewpoints, civil society actors are encouraged to be more constructive and solution-oriented, citizens are urged to be more publicly active and engaged and donors are exhorted to use their international experience to support in Cambodia the types of policy reforms and social accountability mechanisms and practices that have proven effective elsewhere.

138. While all the recommendations outlined in the report are considered important by the study team, the following actions (selected for their strategic impact) are strongly suggested as (immediate and longer-term) priorities. The prioritization of these recommendations was helped by the focus group discussions on an earlier version of this report. They are addressed to each of the study’s target stakeholder groups – the government of Cambodia, CSOs and Development Partners – respectively.

III.B. PRIORITY ACTIONS

III.B.1. Priority Actions for the Government of Cambodia

*In the immediate term:

139. **Government priority action 1 - Instruct (and support) commune councils to convene biannual public forums.** (Recommendations A.2, B.3 and D.3)
Research shows that commune councils hold great (and, as yet, undeveloped) potential as a platform for citizen-state dialogue. The government is encouraged to introduce a practice of regular (biannual) public forums at commune level as an opportunity for citizens to engage with government authorities on issues of priority concern.

140. **Government priority action 2 - Make clear provisions for citizen/CSO participation in newly created district and provincial councils.** (Recommendations A.2, B.3 and D.3)
As present there are few opportunities for civic engagement at the district and provincial levels. The government is encouraged to issue prakas that make clear provisions for meaningful citizen and CSO
participation in the new district and provincial councils (to be established according to the recently adopted Organic Law).

In the longer term:

141. **Government priority action 3 - Instruct schools and health facilities across the country to publicly share budget information.** (Recommendation A.2)

Research found that citizens lack access to information about basic public services that directly affect their well-being. In order to promote transparency and social accountability, the government is encouraged to instruct schools and health facilities across the country to publicly share budget information, allowing users/citizens to be informed about the allocation of public funds (and other resources) to these facilities and how these resources are used. It is recommended that annual financial statements be publicly posted and presented at an annual public forum.

142. **Government priority action 4 - Establish ministerial advisory groups.**

(Recommendations D.1 and D.3)

Regular forums for exchange between civil society and state actors are lacking. It is recommended that the government encourage (or instruct) all major ministries to establish a standing advisory group (comprised of relevant representatives/advisors from civil society, academia, private sector, etc.). These groups would meet on a regular (e.g. quarterly) basis and, according to clearly defined terms of reference, contribute to raising/discussing issues of key public concern, providing feedback on key documents and facilitating processes of public consultation on major new laws/policies.

III.B.2. Priority Actions for CSOs

In the immediate term:

143. **CSO priority action 1 - Expand grassroots level mobilization/empowerment initiatives.**

(Recommendations B.1 and C.1)

Building the knowledge, confidence and power of ordinary citizens (including women, youth and other marginalized groups) is an important element of social accountability. Lack of citizen empowerment at grassroots level is arguably the principal reason why donor support over the past decade has not been more successful in generating active demand for good governance. Empowerment efforts should build on the experiences and lessons of initiatives, such as CEDAC-supported farmers’ associations and KAP village health associations, that aim to address citizens’ practical needs while also strengthening their political voice and influence.

144. **CSO priority action 2 - Introduce “downwards” transparency/reporting practices.**

(Recommendation C.2)

In order to become effective agents of social accountability, CSOs must themselves seek to become models of good governance by improving their own internal governance practices and systems of transparency and downwards accountability. An important aspect of this is to proactively share program and budget information with clients and target populations, and encouraging their active oversight.

In the longer term:

145. **CSO priority action 3 - Develop expertise in participatory, “people-centered” advocacy approaches.** (Recommendation B.1)
CSOs have a crucial role to play in empowering citizens to act and advocate on their own behalf. It is considered a priority for Cambodian CSOs to build their capacity and expertise in participatory, people-centered approaches to advocacy and development.

146. **CSO priority action 4 - Develop roles as facilitators of citizen-state dialogue.** (Recommendation D.2)
Experience shows that citizen-state dialogue benefits greatly from third party facilitation. CSOs have a crucial role to play as “bridges” between citizens and government authorities and are encouraged to place priority on developing and expanding these roles (especially at local level).

III.B.3. **Priority Actions for Development Partners (DPs)**

*In the immediate term:*

147. **DP priority action 1 - Support training and coaching for existing and emerging local level leaders.** (Recommendation B.2)
For ordinary citizens, grassroots and local level leaders play a crucial role as organizers, educators, advocates and intermediaries. Because of these multiple roles, investing in the capacities and skills of local leaders to be responsive and downwardly accountable is considered a priority. DPs should both enhance support to CSOs currently engaged in grassroots leadership training and support capacity-building in this area.

148. **DP priority action 2 - Introduce “downwards” transparency/reporting practices.** (Recommendation C.2)
DPs are encouraged to “set an example” by systematically applying social accountability practices to their own operations (i.e. ensuring that end-users are informed about the allocation and use of development funds and, ideally, are involved in monitoring and evaluating these). By becoming models of downwards transparency and reporting, DPs will not only enhance public oversight of their own funds and programs but also help citizens see what social accountability looks like in practice and, potentially, raise citizen expectations regarding government transparency and accountability.

*In the longer term:*

149. **DP priority action 3 - Expand support for grassroots level initiatives.** (Recommendations B.1 and C.1)
Citizen mobilization and empowerment is essential to the development of civil society and social accountability. Till now, only a very small portion of DP support has been devoted to directly supporting the education, organization and empowerment of citizens at grassroots level. DPs should enhance support to those CSOs working directly at grassroots level and encourage and support national CSOs to adopt more bottom-up approaches and engage more effectively with the grassroots.

150. **DP priority action 4 - Advocate for and support a more enabling policy environment for citizen/CSO participation.** (Recommendation D.1)
Encouraging and supporting the RCG to introduce policies, regulations and guidelines that create public space for citizen association, affirm and protect fundamental citizen rights and set the ground rules for meaningful citizen-state dialogue and participation is considered a priority role for DPs.
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GLOSSARY

**Accountability** is the obligation of power-holders (those who hold political, financial or other forms of power) to take responsibility and answer for their actions. Power-holders can include officials in government, private corporations, international financial institutions and civil society organizations.

**Citizen Empowerment** is the expansion of assets and capabilities of citizens to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives.

**Citizen Participation** is the process through which people and/or civil society organizations (CSOs) influence and share control over priority setting, policy-making, resource allocations and access to public goods and services.

**Citizen Report Cards (CRCs)** are participatory surveys that solicit user feedback on the performance of public services. CRCs are accompanied by extensive media coverage and civil society advocacy in order to exact public accountability.

**Civic Engagement** is the participation of civil society organizations and citizens-at-large through direct and indirect interactions with government, multilateral institutions and business establishments to influence decision making and share control over priority setting, policy making, resource allocations and access to public goods and services.

**Civil Society** is the public sphere, outside of government, market and the family, where citizens and a wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations associate, express their interests and values and seek to advance the common good.

**Community Score Card (CSC)** is a community based monitoring tool that solicits user perceptions on quality, efficiency and transparency. In addition, the CSC process involves an interface meeting between service providers and the community that allows for immediate feedback. Hence, it is an instrument to exact social and public accountability and responsiveness from service providers as well as a means for citizen empowerment.

**Downwards Accountability** refers to the accountability of societal power-holders (e.g. government, private corporations, donors, etc.) to those who are less powerful (e.g. ordinary citizens). Downwards accountability is a core principle of democracy.

**Good Governance** is the government's ability to: 1) ensure political transparency and voice for all citizens, 2) provide efficient and effective public services, 3) promote the health and well-being of its citizens, and 4) create a favorable climate for stable economic growth.

**Independent Budget Analysis (IBA)** is a term used to refer to analytical and advocacy work by civil society and other independent organizations aimed at making public budgets more transparent and at influencing the allocation of public funds. IBA work mobilizes public opinion by showing how budget figures relate to everyday needs.

**Participatory Budgeting** is a mechanism or process through which citizens and/or civil society organizations participate directly in the different phases of the budget formulation, decision-making, and monitoring of budget execution.

**Participatory Expenditure Tracking** is a mechanism or process in which citizens track financial flows and goods throughout the public expenditure cycle, from the source to the destination.
Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E) is a process through which stakeholders at various levels engage in monitoring or evaluating a particular project, program or policy, share control over the content, the process and the results of the M&E activity and engage in taking or identifying corrective actions.

Participatory Policy Formulation is a process through which citizens and/or civil society organizations participate directly in formulating public policies and plans.

Social Accountability refers to the broad range of actions and mechanisms (beyond voting) that citizens and their organizations can use to hold societal power-holders (such as the state) to account, as well as actions on the part of government, civil society, media and other societal actors that promote or facilitate these efforts.

Social Audit (sometimes also referred to as Social Accounting) is a process through which information on the resources (of a project, program or organization) and their use is collected, analyzed and shared publicly in a participatory fashion. The central concern of a social audit is how resources are used for social objectives.

Transparency is a state in which the objectives of a policy, its legal, institutional and economic framework, policy decisions and their rationale, data and information related to monetary and financial policies and the accountability of the policymaking body are provided to the public in an understandable, accessible and timely basis.