Putting government in the hands of the people

Governance is one of the pillars of the new Country Assistance Strategy (CAS) for Cambodia. For this issue the World Bank newsletter had the opportunity to interview Louise Scura, task team leader of Rural Investment and Local Governance project.

Q - You have been working on decentralization and local governance. Could you explain the relation between these please?

A - Decentralization in Cambodia refers to the delegation of political authority from the national government to the newly elected local governments at the commune level. In 2002, for the first time in recent history, local governments were elected in the country’s 1,621 communes/sangkat with mandates of five years. The objective of the decentralization is to make government more responsive to and accountable for meeting the needs of people at the local level. So, in a sense, decentralization is the means to achieve the objective of improved local governance, but decentralization doesn’t necessarily guarantee improved local governance.

Q - Why is it important to ensure that decentralization builds strong local governance in Cambodia? Why is it needed?

A – It is important for development that the public sector in general, and local governments in particular, both have the capacity to respond to local needs, and members and their dependents could be infected with HIV worldwide. Relatively few of these staff and their dependents are using Bank resources or the available benefits to fight their disease. Both prevention and treatment are therefore press-

World Bank staff trained for HIV/AIDS awareness

World Bank staff and their dependents were given a half-day’s training in awareness of HIV/AIDS in the workplace in early May. The training was provided by KHANA – the Khmer HIV/AIDS NGO alliance.

The training included several topics: HIV/AIDS general situation, HIV/AIDS transmission, risk factors and impact, condom use, voluntary confidential counseling and testing (VCCT) and treatment.

Beng Simeth, World Bank Country Office task team leader for HIV/AIDS in the workplace and Human Development Officer, said the training was decided on after a survey of Bank staff showed different levels of knowledge about HIV/AIDS.

“This training is very important to the staff and their dependents to be aware about HIV/AIDS transmission and help them to prevent infection,” he said.

The HIV pandemic has become a development and socio-economic issue at national, regional and global levels, and the World Bank has played a leadership role in the war against the disease.

For the World Bank Group, HIV/AIDS is both a development issue and a workplace issue. The president of the World Bank group, James D Wolfensohn, has pledged that the Bank as a caring employer would work towards a profound objective: no more Bank Group staff or their family members should die from AIDS.

The World Bank already has clear nondiscrimination, confidentiality and comprehensive medical care policies (including antiretroviral drugs and non-emergency evacuation if needed).

HIV/AIDS is already a problem for World Bank staff. Health Services Department (HSD) has estimated that, based on national prevalence, as many as 400 staff

“Because most Cambodians live in rural areas they know the issues already”

continued on page 2

continued on page 3
Putting government in the hand of the people

Continued from page 1

are in practice more responsive to the preferences of local communities. In the aftermath of the recent civil conflict in Cambodia, governance systems had collapsed, and the ability of the national government to respond to the needs of the people, outside the capital has been very limited. It is important in Cambodia, as elsewhere, to develop the capacity, ability and incentives at local level to respond to local needs. Essentially, working on improving local governance means making the local government more responsive, more transparent, and more available to the local community, making sure the public funds are available and put to best use, and ensuring accountability within the local government structure for the use of funds. This is particularly important in Cambodia, because Cambodia has limited resources and needs to put those resources to the best, most effective and most appropriate use.

Q - I understand that you are working on the Rural Investment and Local Governance project (RILGP). Could you explain how the project works and how it can help Cambodia?

A – The RILGP is part of a much broader program of support to decentralization and improved local governance, totaling US$69.16 million. Of this, US$22 million is provided by the International Development Association (IDA), one of the World Bank Group agencies, and the rest is co-financing from UNDP, DFID and SIDA, through the Partnership for Local Governance, as well as from domestic revenues of the Kingdom of Cambodia. US$19 million out of the US$22 million RILGP Credit helps meet the Royal Government’s annual commitments for 2003 through 2006 to the Commune/Sangkat Fund, the intergovernmental fiscal transfer of funds from the national government to the local governments. The Commune/Sangkat Fund covers the cost of Commune Councilors salaries and administrative costs, as well as funds priority development projects at the commune level. In 2004, the allocation to the Commune/Sangkat Fund amounts to about CR 50 billion (about $12.5 million) or on average about $6,000 to $8,000 per commune/sangkat, depending on population and poverty level.

To decide on how these funds will be used, each year the commune/sangkat council, with the assistance of its planning and budgeting committee with representation from the villages, goes through the participatory local planning process to identify the priorities for development at the commune level. During the first two years of operation of the Commune/Sangkat Fund, communes have identified as their priorities basic rural infrastructure such as roads, culverts, wells, water supply, sanitation, small-scale irrigation, schools and clinics. The communes/sangkats use a competitive bidding process to award contracts to local contractors to build this small-scale infrastructure.

It is hoped that the RILGP will contribute to rural development and poverty reduction by enhancing the living conditions in rural communities through improved accessibility to public infrastructure, water and sanitation, and health and education services. Also, it is expected that livelihood opportunities will be enhanced due to more reliable sources of irrigation and better access to markets. It is also hoped that the RILGP will contribute to improved local governance, but supporting the integration and implementation of key features of decentralized systems into the new local government institutional structures and development planning, budgeting, accounting and auditing systems at the local level.

Q – Could you please explain the relationship among the recent decentralization reforms, the Cambodia National Seila Program, and the RILGP?

A - The decentralization reforms came into effect officially with the February 2002 Commune/Sangkat Council elections. Prior to the implementation of these reforms, key features of the decentralized systems were piloted through the Seila Program, including the institutional structures and development planning, budgeting and implementation processes. Many of the key features of the Seila pilot program are now directly reflected in the laws and regulations governing decentralization reforms. So the earlier experience and lessons learned from the Seila Program have directly influenced the actual content of the decentralization reforms. The Seila Program still has a very strong role in continuing work on improving the regulatory framework, in channeling donor resources, and playing a key role in coordinating the activities of all ministries involved in the implementation of the decentralization reforms. The Seila Task Force Secretariat serves as the implementing agency for the World Bank support for decentralization through RILGP. Seila
doesn’t implement the sub-projects that the RILGP finances at the commune level, rather the RILGP support goes directly to the Commune/Sangkat Fund sub-projects. But Seila coordinates these activities, provides related technical assistance, and facilitates payment from the World Bank through the Ministry of Economy and Finance and the Treasury.

Q - How is this project different from a typical World Bank financed projects?

A - The RILGP is what the World Bank refers to as a Specific Investment Loan, because the funds go to specific investments rather than to more general support of the government budget. In that aspect it is a typical project. However, in several other respects RILGP is atypical of IDA-funded projects, and we consider the RILGP, and the implementation of the decentralization reforms it supports, an important experiment for both IDA and Government. First, it is heavily focused on partnership and pushes boundary toward a sector-wide approach by helping to scale-up an existing multi-donor financed government-led program. Second, it pushes the boundary towards budget support by harmonizing IDA safeguarding and fiduciary measures into standardized procedures which apply to entire Commune/Sangkat Fund, not just IDA-financed portion. Third, it avoids projectspecific structures, with implementation arrangements within existing government structures and institutions, requiring cooperation across multiple ministries (e.g., Interior, Economy and Finance, Rural Development), and well as coordination of activities across the three tiers of government – national, province, and commune.

Q - What are the main messages you would like to share in terms of helping Cambodian people to understand the issues involved?

A - Because most Cambodians live in rural areas they know many of the issues very well already, because they are played out in their daily lives. It is very easy for Cambodians to understand the importance of bringing the government closer to them and requiring it to be more responsive to meeting their needs. What they probably don’t understand well enough is how essential their role is in demanding better service delivery, by participating in the process and ensuring their voices are heard, as well as in holding their local government more accountable. They should also know that the World Bank is very committed to supporting the implementation of decentralization to help ensure that the promises of decentralization – better local governance and enhanced service delivery – are actually realized.

Q – How do the Government, Private Sector and Civil Society engage in these issues?

A – Through the decentralization reforms, the national government has delegated political authority and responsibility for delivery of some public goods and services to the Commune/Sangkat Councils. Civil society participates most directly through the commune-level elections every five years, and in the interim through village representatives on the the planning and budgeting committee, as well as direct engagement in public meetings during as part of the planning process. The private sector is engaged most directly through a transparent and competitive bidding process for contracts.

World Bank staff Train for HIV/AIDS...

going agendas for the Bank.

Sreypov Tep, one of World Bank staff who attended the training, said the World Bank is a very good institution for providing this kind of training to staff and their dependents. She said it is very important that everyone should be aware about HIV/AIDS.

“After the training, I have a clear understanding about HIV/AIDS and its transmission, how to prevent HIV/AIDS, how to use condoms, and what the advantages of using condom are,” she said.

“The most important thing is to understand the advantages and disadvantages of doing a blood test through VCCT, and the disadvantages of people hiding themselves when they discover they are infected with HIV/AIDS.

“I also see that the World Bank has a good policy to take care of staff who are infected with HIV/AIDS.” She said.

Nisha Agrawal, Country Manager of Cambodia’s World Bank country office, told staff the training was extremely important for them and for their spouses because Cambodia has a high rate of HIV/AIDS infection. “Everyone should be clear that if staff get HIV/AIDS the Bank will not fire them,” she strongly states. “We are an institution that cares for staff who have this disease.”

Sreypov summed it up: “We participants should all take this awareness to practice in our daily lives.”

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Mr. Mak Thol, one of World Bank staff trainees, learn how to use condom properly
Small Grant Program provide $40,000 to Six NGOs

This is the third year of the Small Grants Program (SmGP) in Cambodia. The SmGP awarded $40,000 to six local organizations last month to support their work with vulnerable groups.

The SmGP was created in 1983 to provide a way for the World Bank to promote dialogue and dissemination about development in forums outside its own operations. The SmGP in Cambodia was started in 2002. Again this year the program provide support to six local NGOs: Gender and Development for Cambodia (GAD/C), Youth For Peace (YFP) Operation Enfants De Battambang (OEB), Dai Kou Kaksekar (DKK), Kampong Cham NGO Advocacy Network (K-NAN), Buddhism for Development (BFD).

GAD/C, a second-time grantee, will use its $8,000 grant to provide training on women’s empowerment through legal awareness to the village core team, then expand awareness outreach to their network in seven communes, publish development posters and materials related to legal matters in the commune council offices and also help with library set up and provide some documents. These activities will be implemented in Kampong Speu, Kampong Chhnang and Pursat provinces.

With $7,500, YFP will organize peace events, a workshop on Youth and leadership, facilitate students initiatives support, organize a community gathering day which will help in Phnom Penh, and a national youth gathering day in Kampong Chhnang province.

OEB is also a second-year grantee, but this year receives $8,500 to continue their program on children’s integrated development in the post conflict areas – Koh Krolor district of Battambang, and Banteay Meanchay province – such as workshops on children rights, hygiene, literacy and nutrition.

SmGP is providing $5,500 to DKK, a local NGO based in Kampong Thom province. With this grant the organization can hold workshops in villages on decentralization management, gender awareness, and support key villagers to participate in commune council development meetings. Besides the workshops, the program will also hold a gathering day in villages, inviting villagers, commune councils, and Village Development Committees to share lessons learnt and reflections from the workshops.

K-NAN has received $5,500 from the SmGP to hold public forum sessions on land issues in seven target districts of Kampong Cham province.

With $5,000 provided by the SGP, BFD will establish a mechanism for engaging in promotion of peace and development through workshops to increase awareness and capacity of commune councils on decentralization, human rights, and conflict resolution.

Nil Vanna, SmGP coordinator, said this year the World Bank grant is being provided to local NGOs who will be implementing their process in a broad range of communes in Phnom Penh, Kampong Cham, Kampong Speu, Kampong Thom, Prey Veng, Siem Reap, Kampong Chhnang, Banteay Meanchay, Battambang, Pursat and Takeo.

“This program contributes in promoting dialogues and building the capacity of commune council members, giving voice to the poor to express their ideas and concerns related to local development issues,” she said.” This program is also helping to improve transparency, accountability and local ownership.”

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We Welcome Your Opinions and Comments

We welcome your opinions, comments and questions. Please send them to: Bou Saroeun, Communications Specialist, at 113 Norodom Blvd., Phnom Penh, email: sbou@worldbank.org. We very much appreciate your valuable assistance.