



## Local Good Governance of Rural Infrastructure Development Planning: Case Studies of Commune Councils in Cambodia

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**Abstract** The research examines the application of local good governance (LGG) in the implementation of rural infrastructure development planning (RIDP) and analyzes its strengths and limitations. Two communes with longer and shorter working experience in the application of LGG in RIDP, viz. Khnach Romeas (KR) and Prey Khpos (PK) in Battambang province were selected. The study covered six elements of LGG: rule of law, participation, accountability, transparency, responsiveness and effectiveness and efficiency. The research revealed that the commune with relatively longer working experience (KR) had achieved better performance on several key elements of LGG than the one with shorter working experience (PK). Better performance in LGG by KR than PK commune was due to several factors, including better understanding and application of LGG in RIDP, wider learning by doing in RIDP, more effective fundraising for project implementation, stronger commitment among commune councils (CCs), better coaching and mentoring support from district planning facilitators and authorities and more active local participation. CCs and sampled households expressed relatively higher satisfaction levels on rural infrastructure projects as a result of the use of LGG. Therefore, the LGG performance in applying RIDP of the two study communes was significantly determined by several institutional, economic, and social factors.

**Keywords** decentralization, rural infrastructure, rural development planning process, local good governance, commune councils

### INTRODUCTION

The Royal Government of Cambodia's strategic policy framework, outlined in the Rectangular Strategy Phase II, puts deconcentration and decentralization (D&D) policy to achieve good governance (RGC, 2008). D&D policy was formally put into action in February 2002 (Romeo and Spyckerelle, 2003), when commune elections were held, following extensive piloting since 1996 by the donor-funded Seila Program of the Royal Government of Cambodia which aimed to mobilize aid and coordinate D&D reforms and to alleviate poverty in selected northeastern provinces of Cambodia (RGC, 2000) through local governance reform and participatory planning. Five years of Commune Development Planning (CDP) and annual Commune Investment Plan (CIP) manuals were developed and endorsed for CCs in 2001, then revised in 2007 to improve the planning process (MoI and MoP, 2007). The investment grant through a fiscal transfer from the national budget to CCs for CDP implementation gives priority to rural infrastructure. The arguments for this are that rural infrastructure creates favorable opportunities for production, movement of goods, and market access and contributes to poverty reduction (NCSC, 2005).

The enabling environment for local good governance is still weak. An unclear legal framework and fragmented application of local governance contributed to a lack of decision-making at local levels; top officials have tended to exercise their power and control in local planning (ADB, 2000). There is limited participatory local governance, as democratic decision-making is poorly understood and internalized among the various committees of CCs (NCSC, 2005; Pellini and Ayres, 2007). To some extent, CCs still have limited capacity in the application of LGG through existing traditional and hierarchical decision-making structures (NCSC, 2005) that continue to affect the emergence of an effective local development process in developing countries (Hop, 2009). Specifically, there is poor participation in CDP and CIP, and limited engagement with the demands of local people (Vuthyand Craig, 2008). Moreover, local officials who facilitate planning processes lack experience in encouraging local participation in both planning and implementation (Charny, 1999). Accountability of CCs to local people through CDP is still weak and difficult to establish (Rohdewohld and Porter, 2006). The ongoing public administrative reform has not yet built effective systems for transparency and accountability (Sokha, 2005). Therefore, many aspects of LGG are weakly developed or nonexistent: there is low participation, lack of transparency, weak accountability, and low inclusiveness.

The research examines the application of local good governance (LGG) in the local planning and implementation process of rural infrastructure development planning (RIDP), and analyzes its strengths and limitations in order to identify the challenges and prospects for further strengthening LGG of RIDP.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Rural Infrastructure Development Planning (RIDP), which is planned and implemented under the CDP and CIP, was conceptualized in seven key stages: 1) plan formulation; 2) identification/review of needs and problems; 3) selection of the priority project; 4) district integration workshop; 5) approval of the development plan; 6) project implementation; and 7) project monitoring and evaluation. Rural infrastructure projects studied in this research include rural laterite roads, box culverts, and earth roads. Six key elements of LGG assessed in this study are rule of law, participation, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, and effectiveness and efficiency.

The study was based in two purposely selected communes with relatively different working experience in RIDP, located in Battambang province. Khnach Romeas (KR) had longer experience in decentralization, since 1996, and Prey Khpos (KP) became involved in 2002. Primary data were collected by using two sets of standardized questionnaires designed for 60 CCs and committees, and 110 sampled households. Checklists were used for focus group discussion, key informant interviews, observation, and case studies on RIDP commune projects. Secondary data was scrutinized from literature, related laws, policies and development plans, sub-decrees, declarations, manuals, books, journal articles, and papers. Both quantitative and qualitative techniques were applied. A weight average index (WAI) based on Likert's five social-scale interval was applied to assess local perception of achievement and satisfaction of LGG applied in RIDP from CCs and committees, and sampled households.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Analysis of application of LGG in RIDP**

The application of LGG in RIDP was synthesized in both study communes and a comparison made against each element of LGG (Table 1).

**Table 1 Synthesis of LGG applied in RIDP of KR and PK communes**

Khnach Romeas (KR)	Prey Khpos (PK)
<i>Rule of Law</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rule of law in terms of guidelines and manual on RIDP and project implementation was well applied by both communes.</li> </ul>	
<i>Participation</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning and Budgeting Committees (PBCs) participated in preparing budget and development framework during the initial stage of RIDP and reviewed local problems and needs.</li> <li>• Villagers, including women and vulnerable groups, actively participated in meetings to identify and prioritize their needs and identify locations for the project site.</li> <li>• NGOs and line departments participated in technical and financial support of proposed projects presented by PBCs, who were also active in exchanging ideas and explaining RIDP to supporters.</li> <li>• PBCs and CCs participated in decision-making to approve RIDP.</li> <li>• Local villagers were involved in the feasibility study. This led to harmonious solutions on the land contribution and impact assessment. Villagers were also involved in project implementation, in site clearance for the convenience of contractors and labor contribution, in addition to their cash contribution (10 percent of the project cost).</li> <li>• Villagers participated in project M&amp;E as well as maintenance and gave comments on projects that were well received by village headmen and on which actions were taken.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PBC members reviewed and prioritized problems and needs.</li> <li>• Villagers, including women and vulnerable groups, participated in meetings to identify and prioritize local problems, needs, and project sites. PBCs were unable to mobilize many of them to join in the activity. People did not speak out and mostly listened to PBCs, who led the decision-making.</li> <li>• NGOs and line departments provided technical and financial support to proposed projects by PBCs, but the PBCs were not so active in exchanging ideas and explaining RIDP to potential supporters.</li> <li>• PBCs and CCs participated in RIDP approval, but not all were present.</li> <li>• Villagers were involved in the feasibility study, yet proper action was not undertaken by CCs in order to solve key issues such as land acquisition for the infrastructure. Limited numbers of villagers participated in site clearance for project implementation, but villagers contributed cash (10 percent of project cost) for project implementation.</li> <li>• Villagers' participation in project M&amp;E was weak, and comments from villagers were not acted upon by CCs and M&amp;E committees. Local participation in project maintenance was not adequate.</li> </ul>
<i>Accountability</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PBCs were involved in annual District Integration Workshop (DIW) to select infrastructure projects to be implemented, and to be endorsed by CCs.</li> <li>• The procurement committee took responsibility for preparing bidding documents and handled bidding properly.</li> <li>• The M&amp;E committee mobilized public participation in project monitoring and evaluation, and reported on project progress to all participants at the monthly meetings.</li> <li>• Operation and maintenance groups functioned well.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PBCs were involved in the DIW to finalize projects and get endorsement from CCs, but persons to be in charge of this activity were not designated clearly.</li> <li>• The procurement committee did not prepare and handle the bidding well, due to a lack of clarity and understanding of their roles and responsibilities.</li> <li>• The M&amp;E committee did not adequately mobilize people to participate in project monitoring and evaluation, and did not make proper reports about project progress to the monthly meetings.</li> <li>• Operation and maintenance groups were not well established and lacked clear responsibility.</li> </ul>
<i>Transparency</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information on the RIDP was disseminated to local people, line agencies, and NGOs.</li> <li>• Bidding was conducted in a public place with participation from all interested stakeholders. The bidding documents were accessible and the contract was awarded based on the given criteria. Villagers were satisfied with the outcome. The result of bidding was announced publicly, and the contract was signed using a standard format.</li> <li>• Reports on RIDP implementation and finances were posted on public information boards. Project information was reported to the monthly meetings. Payment to contractors was based on consensus decision among CCs and the M&amp;E committee. RIDP evaluation was conducted in a timely fashion. Financial auditing was conducted both internally and externally. Project signboards were not erected at the project site, and thus political parties gained</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information on the RIDP was disseminated to local people, line agencies, and NGOs.</li> <li>• Bidding was conducted in a public place and with participation from all interested stakeholders. The bidding documents were accessible and the contract was awarded based on the given criteria. Villagers were not satisfied with the contractors due to their unfavorable reputation in the commune. The result of bidding was announced publicly, and the contract was signed using a standard format.</li> <li>• Reports on RIDP implementation and finances were not posted on the public information board. Project information was not disseminated properly at the monthly meetings. Payment to contractors was not based on consensus decision-making among CCs and the M&amp;E committee. Moreover, RIDP evaluation was not</li> </ul>