(Re)building State Legitimacy as a Way Towards Political Reconciliation

*The Changing Role of Local Authorities in Rural Cambodia*

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Introduction

Local Governance Reform as a Way Towards Political Reconciliation

Internal conflicts often lead to (and/or result from) questioning and delegitimisation of political authority. Reconstruction and reconciliation processes must therefore include rebuilding legitimate political institutions and practices. Though rarely included in formal peace agreements with international mediation and support, the necessary political reconciliation implies the (re)establishment of trust, not only between previously warring parties, but also between the state authorities and the population at large. For such (re)legitimisation to be possible, various levels of authorities must have relevant and well known mandates, adequate competence and resources, and workable links to other levels of authority.

To achieve that, for most war-torn societies implies far-reaching government reform, which is seldom part of explicit reconstruction/reconciliation activities. “Good governance” is however a dominant discourse within current development thinking and practice, and separate interventions, not linked to formal peace agreements, aimed at establishing liberal democracy are common. A lot of hope is also tied to different forms and degrees of decentralisation, and the interventions often include the introduction of a new institutional set-up, capacity building and policy formulation.

Though not an explicit goal, strengthening local governance, may be a way towards political reconciliation between the population and the political elite. Legitimate, competent and dedicated local authorities with clear mandates and relevant tasks – and adequate resources – should have a fair chance to gain the population’s trust, and thus (re)build state legitimacy from below.

Like with all planned development interventions, the implementation and outcome of a governance intervention – including its potential contribution to political legitimacy and reconciliation – largely depend on the local context. People’s previous experiences and current expectations, as well as the authorities’ historical tasks and recent performance will influence how new socio-political structures and practices are received.

A government reform must therefore not – also when externally supported, or even externally initiated and designed – be steered by external or instrumental interests, or pursue alien models. Rather, when intervening in local communities and introducing new governance
structures, it is crucial to consider local political and administrative culture and practices, and to try to understand how people perceive the political authorities.

There is however a lack of research focusing on previous and current conditions in rural Cambodia. The aim of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of local socio-political structures, actors, practices and perceptions, and ongoing changes, from Cambodian villagers’ perspectives. It looks at the efforts, through a decentralisation reform with international support, to strengthen local governance and improve the relations between the population and the authorities by (re)building local legitimacy.²

Some socio-political features of rural Cambodia will be briefly described, as will the main government reform initiative. The empirical findings will illustrate the partly changing role and conduct of local authorities, and partly changing expectations and strategies of villagers. Then a discussion will follow of the possible implications for state legitimacy and political reconciliation.

Governance Intervention in a Difficult Context

Cambodia is an illustrative case of how planned development interventions have moved from quick-impact activities towards support for “good governance”. Since the mid- or late 1990s, as the country entered a transition to peace, interventions aimed at local democracy have been increasingly possible. After genocide, isolation and prolonged insecurity caused by Khmer Rouge insurgents, in the late 1990s all areas of the country were secure from guerrilla warfare for the first time in over 30 years. From the early 1990s, interventions by a wide range of organisations had been an increasingly common feature, initiating various activities and often setting up new bodies such as women’s groups, buffalo banks and credit schemes, where selected individuals filled new positions. Now, international donors as well as the national government increasingly emphasised the importance of “good governance”, i.e. liberal

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¹ Obviously, in cases where such legitimacy has never existed, it will be a matter of building rather than rebuilding.
² The paper builds on extensive empirical research in two lowland communities during 1999-2000 (Hasselskog 2000), and does thus not include changes during and after the elections for commune councils in early 2002. The research team consisted of an expatriate PhD student who did the study as an integrated part of a long-term assignment with the UNDP in Cambodia, a Cambodian employee of the Ministry of Rural Development (MRD) and a Cambodian former Red Cross employee, all women. The team spent about four months in the two villages, conducting semi-structured interviews with villagers and village leaders, along with observations and frequent informal encounters. In each village, a group of “research advisors” was set up to help the team with cross-checking and feedback on preliminary analysis. Towards the end of the research, five-day cross visits between the two villages were arranged for four-five people from each village to further stimulate villagers’ input into especially the comparative analysis. At the commune level, officials were interviewed at several occasions, while in the provinces, government staff as well as UNDP/CARERE staff and managers were interviewed and briefed throughout the research. People’s names in the empirical findings have been changed.
democracy including decentralisation. At the local level this has been manifested through 
projects that introduce new institutions, such as elected village committees and participatory 
planning and decision-making processes, and in some cases devolved development funds. 

Cambodia is also an example of how external actors have been able to design a virtually 
new system of governance, which is seen for example in the fact that the 1993 constitution as 
well as the 1996 Socio-Economic Development Plan are drafted in English. Though initially 
driven by external agents, however, local governance and decentralisation reforms have been 
increasingly adopted and driven by the Cambodian government (Kato et al. 2000, Smoke 
2000, Charny 1999). The main intervention and reform initiative towards liberal democracy 
and decentralisation was the government’s gradually expanding Seila programme,\(^3\) initiated 
and supported by the UNDP-project CARERE from 1996. In 1999, the government confirmed 
a national policy that had been practised in the Seila area since 1996 of rural development 
committees at province, commune and village levels, as part of an overall Rural Development 
Structure (RDS), with the role to plan and coordinate development activities. Then, in early 
2001, laws on commune elections and administration were passed, paving the way for a 
nation-wide decentralisation reform, which was manifested by the elections of commune 
councils with a far reaching mandate in early 2002 (Cambodia Ministry of Rural 
decimalisation reform that followed give the commune\(^4\) a key role in the planning, decision-
making and implementation of development activities. At the village level, responsibility for 
coordination of development activities had already been placed with the elected Village 
Development Committee (VDC) alongside various bodies with more specific tasks such as 
rice bank committees and maintenance groups.

There are practices and perceptions in Cambodian village life and socio-political culture 
that may seem to make external interventions aimed at introducing liberal democracy difficult 
(c.f. Thion 1993; Ledgerwood 1998). It is well known that the Cambodian society contains 
historical patterns of domination and repression (c.f. Chandler and Mabbet 1999; Martin 
1994). The widespread notion is that the society is dominated by deep-rooted hierarchical 
structures, patron-client relations, silent obedience, and a general lack of trust and cohesion 
among the population as well as towards the authorities (e.g. Vickery 1986; Thion 1993; 
Martin 1994; Ovesen et al. 1996). Cambodia is also conceived of as historically a society of 

\(^3\) Seila is a government public sector reform programme, supported by UNDP, on decentralisation of 
development planning, financing and management, aiming to improve the relations between the state and the 
population and to empower people to be participating in the “development process”.
physical violence and military presence (Bit 1991). During the 1980s – and in some places until the late 1990s – most of the rural population lived under the threat of Khmer Rouge insurgents, while the rural population has also constantly risked being forcefully recruited by the authorities. Among the main tasks of commune and village authorities during the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) regime in the 1980s, were to recruit labour force and soldiers, and to collect money and materials, which rendered them feared and made villagers run away as they came to the village. Another main task was to distribute land, which opened for suspicions of injustices.

The socio-political climate is thus historically one of fear and compliance. The local authorities lack legitimacy and people do not have generally positive experiences or expectations, but have rather developed a sense of suspicion and a strategy of keeping away. Such historically rooted obstacles in local socio-political culture make it all the more necessary – and all the more difficult – to establish political legitimacy and trust between local officials and the population.

Empirical Findings

From Authorities’ Unclear Security Mandate and People’s Avoidance…

The case studies show that villagers were not clear about the local authorities’ tasks and responsibilities. This is not surprising since, at least before the commune reform, there were no explicit and clearly announced mandates or regulations for what Village Chiefs and Deputies could do, what they must do, or how they should do it.\(^5\)

In one of the case study villages, it was not even clear if there at all was a Deputy Village Chief. The man who used to have the position did not know if he had actually lost it and, if so, why. In practice, however, he had no influence since he did not have the support of the commune authorities, and his judgements would therefore easily be questioned. There was also a militiaman whose actual position was unclear and who was feared and disliked by villagers, but supported by the Commune Chief and therefore in many cases more powerful than the Village Chief.

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\(^4\) The commune is the next administrative level above the village.

\(^5\) Before the local elections in 2002, both Commune and Village Chiefs were appointed by higher authorities, though at some places there have been some kind of symbolic elections between a couple of appointed candidates.
At both case study sites, villagers’ main perception was that the local authorities are for those who have done something wrong, while “ordinary villagers” usually have no reason to see them. By far the most commonly mentioned role of village and commune authorities was to help solve conflicts among villagers, which seemed to be done in quite an informal manner. The Village Chief in one of the villages claimed to be frequently consulted for conflict resolution and described the latest case:

Last Sunday some buffaloes had eaten rice plants on somebody’s land. The landowner caught the buffaloes and brought them to me. I guarded them during the night. Then the buffalo owner came to get his buffaloes back. I called the landowner and discussed with them. The landowner demanded 50,000 riel (US$ 13) [as compensation for the lost rice]. The buffalo owner wanted to pay only 10,000 riel, and I said “please, increase it a little bit”… At last they agreed on 20,000 riel. (Village Chief (m) October 1999)

Villagers in this village, however, widely complain that conflict resolution by the village authorities is expensive, not fair, and sometimes not even available. They claim that both the Village Chief and the militiaman mentioned above favour their relatives and friends, and that it is the one who pays most to either of them who wins a case. Someone who cannot pay will not get any help. Also, the Village Chief is said to be frequently absent, and not interested in helping, while the militiaman is not trusted and charges too much. An old landless widow’s recent encounters with the two illustrate what others have also experienced:

As the woman’s daughter was getting married, she went to inform the Village Chief. After walking the two or three kilometres to his house three times, just to find that he was not there, she gave up. Some time later, a neighbour accused her son-in-law of having stolen rice from his rice store. This time the woman went to see the militiaman who lives nearby. But he refused to help her if she did not first give him 5,000 riel (US$ 1.3).

While villagers in this village therefore prefer to solve their problems and conflicts among themselves, people in the other village more frequently consult the village authorities. There too, however, villagers are not completely happy with the assistance they get. The general perception is that assistance by the Village Chief is cheap and reasonably fair but slow, while the more educated Deputy is fast and efficient but expensive.
When it comes to villagers’ perceptions of authorities outside the village, people in the study were even less clear about roles and responsibilities. The commune was in most villagers’ minds blurred into the very widely used concept of “higher levels” (thnaak leuk), filled by “big people” (neak thom). And though almost everybody could name the hierarchy of “commune – district – province – Phnom Penh”, these levels were perceived as very distant and inaccessible. Theoretically, conflicts between villagers can be taken to the commune and district authorities, or even to court in the province or Phnom Penh. The idea of actually doing so, however, seemed remote to most villagers. This sense of distance and inaccessibility is illustrated by a statement by a middle-aged woman: *We cannot meet the provincial people. I don’t know where they live. In Pursat [the provincial town] there are so many buildings, so we wouldn’t find it.* (Villager (f) October 1999)

Also, in one of the villages, people claimed that they cannot bypass the Village Chief, which was confirmed by the Village Chief as well as the Commune Chief. If somebody wants to seek help from the commune authorities, for example to solve a conflict or to get a marriage certificate, they have to go through the Village Chief, who will then inform the Commune Chief – and charge for this service.

In the other village, people said that they feel free to go straight to the authorities outside the village. Still, they very rarely do so. Instead, they claimed to always try to solve conflicts within the village – some said because it is expensive to go further, some said because the Deputy Village Chief is eager to help in order to make money for himself. The widespread perception that “the further you go, the more you will have to pay”, is illustrated by the motorbike accident when a young boy hit another boy from a different commune:

> The injured boy’s parents made a complaint, and all those involved were called to their commune. Vuen, who is a friend of the family of the boy who had been riding the motorbike, also went to help. It took them three days to come to an agreement.

> The first day, the victim’s side demanded 80,000 baht (US$ 2,100) in compensation. But Vuen said that was far too much. They would never be able to save that much money, but could pay only 10,000 baht. After all it was just a broken leg.

> So, the victim’s side reduced their claim to 65,000 baht, but Vuen still refused and asked them to go back home and think about it.

> The next claim was 25,000 baht, but the others maintained that they could not pay more than 10,000. So, the victim’s side tried with 15,000 baht.

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6 In this village trade across the Thai border is common, and the Thai currency widely used.
- I again insisted on 10,000, Vuen says. And I added that if they didn’t agree but wanted to bring the complaint to higher levels, like the district or the province, they would get even less, because we would have to spend a lot of money, and only pay them what remained.

    When the victim’s side heard that, they accepted 10,000 baht.

- They were afraid that they would lose money. If they had gone to higher levels, they would have got only 2,000 or 3,000 baht.

Apart from the high costs involved, there was also a notion among villagers of not understanding the procedures at higher levels and therefore being easily cheated. This is illustrated by a young woman’s story about her divorce:

Sophy married when she was 24, but when she a year later had a miscarriage and could not work, she and her husband decided to divorce. The man went to inform the Village Chief, who asked them to come to see him the following day.

- Husband and wife came together on a bicycle, the Village Chief recalls. I could see that there was no conflict between them. The problem was that their mothers didn’t like each other.

    The Village Chief tried to persuade the couple to remain together. He called them a second time and a third time, when their mothers were also present. But they still claimed that they wanted a divorce.

- I could not force them to stay together, the Village Chief says, so I agreed on a divorce.

    According to Sophy, it was the man’s mother who did not accept that they remained married.

- She told the Village Chief to do anything he could to arrange a divorce. If he did that, she would give him 20,000 riel (US$ 5.3).

    Three years later, the man wanted to marry another woman. Sophy did not like the idea, but also claims that the village militiaman encouraged her to complain about her former husband getting married, because he expected to get some benefits out of a conflict case.

    Sophy went to the commune authorities and claimed that she and her husband were not properly divorced. For that, both of them need to get a certificate at the commune, which she had not done. So, when the man came to the commune to get a permission to get married, he did not get it but was asked to pay compensation to his former wife.

- But he preferred to pay to the commune, Sophy says. He gave money to the Commune Chief for him to keep quiet. He gave money to the commune people, and they changed their minds.
Unsurprisingly, the Commune Chief tells a different story.
- We asked him to compensate her economically to make her happy. But he had no money, so we couldn’t solve the case. If a couple don’t agree, the commune cannot decide on a divorce.

The commune authorities sent the case to the provincial court, and the couple were called there three times. The first time, the man was asked to pay compensation to Sophy. He did not agree. The second time, Sophy was asked to agree on a proper divorce. She did not agree. The third time, the Village Chief was also called, and his statement made the court decide in favour of the man.

Today the man is married to the other woman, and Sophy claims that he won the case because of his money and because she did not understand what happened.
- First the Village Chief said that I was right and explained what I had to do. The next time, he had changed his mind. I could have given him money too, and he would have changed his mind again. But I only brought a package of cigarettes when I went to see to the Village Chief and the Commune Chief. And the court cheated me. They made me put my thumbprint on a paper. I thought it was in order to take the case to the court in Phnom Penh. But it was an agreement on divorce. It’s difficult for me to understand, it’s all in their hands.

Though, obviously, this is one side of the story, the woman’s experiences and interpretations illustrate that villagers may think of themselves as being at the mercy of authorities and procedures that they do not understand and cannot anticipate. The woman thought that she had done what she could and followed the advice that she got, but had been cheated by the authorities that were favouring her opponent.

There were also widely spread expectations among officials at all levels (as well as among villagers) to receive instructions from above and provide information upwards, while rarely expecting to be able to influence decisions at higher levels or to demand downward accountability. Local officials’ room for manoeuvre largely depends on their relations to higher authorities. While Village Chiefs are quite weak without the support, or at least the acceptance, of the commune authorities, the same kind of subordination was perceived among officials at other levels. The Commune Chief in one of the study areas was discouraged when he described his relation to the district authorities: *The commune doesn’t have the right to do anything. We live under the district. (...) I’m at a low level, and higher levels rarely pay attention to us.* (Commune Chief (m) February 2000)

These findings indicate an arbitrariness in the role and conduct of local authorities, and a lack of accountability. One Village Chief is not very interested in or committed to helping the villagers, another would like to but is not very knowledgeable. A militiaman with an
unclear position is influential and eager to be involved, but feared by the villagers, and a Deputy Village Chief is capable but more concerned about personal benefits than common good. In the absence of explicit and announced mandates and regulations for how to perform certain tasks, a Village Chief can largely choose to be as active or passive as he likens, and to run village affairs the way he finds most appropriate, or most convenient. The influence of individual Village Chiefs and Deputies, and what kind of assistance villagers can expect from them, thus depend on their personalities, knowledge, interests and commitment. In many cases this makes a Village Chief’s role resemble that of running a family rather than doing a specified job or fulfilling an official’s tasks. Obviously, this poses several problems in terms of democracy. While the authorities can extend their area of influence and act in quite an autocratic manner, it is difficult for villagers to demand certain services and to hold the village authorities accountable.

As illustrated, the case studies also indicate that villagers perceived injustices and insecurity in legal procedures. To receive efficient assistance from the local authorities requires payment, and sometimes the authorities are not at all available. Villagers may also find themselves at the mercy of people and advice that they do not trust, and procedures that they do not understand and cannot foresee. If the village authorities are uninterested or unreliable, villagers will hesitate to turn to them for assistance. And there may be nowhere else to turn, especially not if the village authorities are backed up by the commune authorities, and if – as in one of the cases – these do not allow villagers to come straight to them if there is a problem. The idea may be for lower levels of authority to represent the population in relation to higher levels. But if these lower levels instead are more dependent on – and therefore more loyal to – the level above them than to the people they are to represent, it leaves the population with no entries into to the system. Villagers will find themselves at the bottom level, receiving instructions from above, but with no mechanisms of upward communication.

While most villagers thus expressed dissatisfaction with how the local leaders help to solve conflicts (though for most this is not a big problem since they do not usually need such help) the village authorities all expressed a strong reluctance to having their positions. The main reasons given were that the positions involve an increasing workload, but no

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7 The overwhelming majority of Village Chiefs in Cambodia are men.
remuneration or other advantages, and that tasks such as conflict resolution make them disliked among villagers. Therefore, the village officials in this study claimed that they would prefer to spend their time in their rice fields, with their grand children, at the pagoda, or to make a different career. If this reluctance is sincere, it is problematic, since someone who does not want to be a leader may not be a very good and reliable one. As will be discussed, however, there may be other reasons for claiming not to want a position.

Meanwhile, villagers’ main strategy seemed to be to avoid the authorities, to wait to see what they come up with. Villagers widely claimed to always obey, to do as the authorities tell them to, without expecting fair treatment or efficient services in return, which was colourfully exemplified by an old woman’s firm declaration: *Whatever they say, we just let them do it. If they tell me to go to prison, I’ll go.* (Villager (f) October 1999)

Another illustration of villagers’ claim to obey without questioning instructions from above, is their descriptions of what happened when people from the district suddenly came to ask every family to pay 10,000 riel (US$ 2.6) for new family/identity cards. Though villagers said that they were not clear what the cards are for, they claimed that those who could, had hurried to collect the money, even borrowing or taking what they had saved for fertilisers. They were convinced that if they did not pay immediately, they would have to pay more later on, and even more the longer they waited. Someone had seen on TV that the cards should cost only 6,000 riel, but it had not occurred to anyone to complain openly.

Obviously, such statements and stories do not necessarily reflect villagers’ actual behaviour and sentiments. While there are historical reasons for fearing the authorities and doing as you are told, villagers’ current avoidance of the authorities in the two villages did not seem to be based on actual fear, but rather on indifference. As they did not expect anything good to come from the authorities, they perceived no reason to consult them, but preferred to have as little as possible to do with them. In at least one of the villages there were also still bad feelings among villagers for claimed injustices in connection to land distribution during the PRK regime, which seemed to be a remaining reason for lack of trust and for the perception that authorities favour their relatives and friends.

Considering villagers’ sense of distance and limited familiarity and contacts with the authorities, strategies of compliance and avoidance are scarcely surprising. While they may reflect expectations and behaviour that run contrary to liberal democratic ideals, villagers’

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8 At the time of the research, Village Chiefs received a monthly salary from the state of 10,000 riel (2.5 US dollar), though the payment was often delayed by months or even years. Deputy Village Chiefs did not get any salary, if the Village Chief did not share his.
claimed level of obedience may however also be higher than the actual. If people ran away when the authorities were recruiting soldiers and labour force, they may well do so also when the authorities want payment for family cards.

… Towards Defined Development Tasks and Resistance
With the setting up of a new administrative structure within Seila/CARERE (and after this study with the commune reform), the tasks and mandates of local authorities have been more clearly defined and regulated. Their role has also changed, from mainly security and conflict resolution towards what is usually called “development”. The commune authorities (and to some extent the Village Development Committee) are in charge of development activities, which includes making decisions on the allocation of a small local development fund, LDF.9 Village and commune officials also all claimed that they are now very busy with “development”.

The case studies show that the changes in authorities’ tasks and the forming of various village level development bodies and positions, have had highly varying impact on local politics and power structures. In one of the villages, the establishment of a VDC (alongside already existing rice bank and credit committees and various positions such as health volunteers and village veterinarians) has led to a division of tasks between village authorities and development leadership. In the province where this village is situated, the rule has been that Village Chiefs and Deputies cannot be VDC-members, but that the Village Chief serves as an advisor to the VDC. This has decreased the risk of autocratic exercise of power by the Village Chief, and instead resulted in good cooperation between him and the VDC. This may, however, largely be a result of the personalities involved, mainly the Village Chief who seems genuinely relieved that others are doing most of the development related tasks. In this village, though, development tasks, and the influence that they imply, have come to be concentrated to a few people who form a new – largely elected – elite, excluding others from influence and even information. Development work has come to be dominated by a few individuals (men), while other knowledgeable and committed people (not least women) are disregarded, and their capacity wasted.

In the other village, the establishment of a VDC (and a number of other development related positions, such as village veterinarians and health volunteers) and the inflow of

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9 The Local Development Fund is an important component of the decentralisation of a development mandate to communes. At the time of the research, the LDF was allocated to all communes in the Seila area, for the Commune Development Committee (CDC), with village representatives, to decide on its use.
external development funds, at a first glance appears to have concentrated and increased the power of the already powerful. Here it was beyond questioning that the Village Chief should also be the VDC-leader. And despite his very low interest in development work, he has come to completely dominate the VDC, while other members are scarcely involved or informed, and therefore quite dejected. Also, though the above mentioned militiaman failed to be elected, he tends to control the VDC:s activities – backed up by the Commune Chief and further discouraging the VDC-members. In the short run, development activities and the funds that come with them, have thus strengthened the two most influential people in the village, without rendering them more accountable. As long as the old habit dominates, where villagers do not (openly) question or challenge the leaders, the new resources and activities increase these leaders’ personal influence. Perhaps paradoxically, however, this may also have made them more vulnerable. Their mismanagement and abuse of power have become more apparent, and more relevant to people’s livelihood as it involves development funds that should be used for everybody’s benefit, which has added to the already existing dissatisfaction with their leadership, and led to open challenges (see below).

The two villages thus demonstrate very different effects on local power structures, which illustrates that local specificities, including personalities and personal relations of those involved, are crucial for the implementation and outcomes of interventions aimed at socio-political change. Both case studies indicate a potential risk that elections, rather than opening opportunities for marginalised groups and individuals, become a mechanism for increasing the influence of the already influential – be they village officials or other villagers who are regarded and regard themselves as leaders. It takes more than elections for people to change their expectations of whom to have a leadership position, and thus whom to vote for. As a result, it will not be the poorest, not the least educated, and not women, who are elected – and thus not their views and interests that are represented (which may not be very different from the situation in many liberal democracies in the west). Nevertheless, the still new and far from perfect system of elections for VDCs and other development positions has in other cases created opportunities for women who could wield actual power at the local level. Also, as villagers gradually get used to the idea of electing representatives, and of not re-electing those who misbehave, existing leaderships can be expected to slowly get more questioned and challenged, while alternative leaders may emerge (see below). And this would make it increasingly possible for villagers to dismiss leaders who they are not happy with – and potentially pave the way for fundamental changes in political expectations and power structures.
At both case study sites, all those with a development position expressed strong reluctance to holding it, similar to the claimed reluctance of village authorities already described. In one village this reluctance was explained mainly by the workload involved, in the other by a feeling among position holders that they have no influence and that other villagers dislike and blame them for various shortcomings.\textsuperscript{10} In both villages, however, people claimed that they have to accept a position if they are elected or appointed.

Such reluctance and perceived compulsion among holders of development positions as well as officials pose a problem of accountability. When someone is doing a job that she or he does not want to do, it may be difficult for others to demand efficient services and accountability. This may, however, be exactly why so many claim to not want their positions. Local officials as well as VDC-members may want to seem reluctant, in order that villagers will be grateful to them and not too demanding. Still, of course, the disadvantages of holding a position may also be genuinely felt.

When it comes to villagers’ perceptions of development work in the two villages, at the time of the research their understanding of roles and responsibilities was weak. Almost no villagers were aware of the VDC as a group, or of its overall role. What they did know was a few individuals and their occasional specific tasks, such as collecting money for the road or maintaining a well. Their understanding of the commune’s involvement in development activities was even weaker, which may not be surprising but which is crucial considering the key role of the commune in the Seila programme and the government reform. Some commune, district and province officials had become slightly more known among villagers, since they got involved in development work and therefore come to the villages somewhat more often. A woman who saw the District Chief when he came to inaugurate a road construction, expressed what many villagers appreciate in an official: The new District Chief is friendly and simple. He doesn’t think of whom he is, sometimes he wears a kramaa and walks as villagers. (Villager (f) October 1999)

Nevertheless, villagers in the study widely claimed that people from “higher levels” usually come only to see the Village Chief or the VDC-leader. And not a single villager was clear about the existence, composition or role of the Commune Development Committee (CDC), nor about the existence and allocation of the Local Development Fund (LDF), even less so about villagers’ right to be represented in the CDC when the LDF is allocated. Even

\textsuperscript{10} At the same time, however, in one of the villages there was competition for going to meetings and trainings related to development activities when there is daily subsistence allowance, which had created conflicts and further complaints about the village authorities favouring themselves and their friends.
the CDC-members themselves (the VDC-leaders and, in one of the villages, a women’s representative) were not aware of the role of the CDC or of how decisions are made.

Such weaknesses in villagers’ understanding of authority and development roles and responsibilities pose obvious problems in terms of democracy. Though recently formulated development mandates and procedures may be formally defined, as long as villagers are not clear about their representatives’ tasks – or even about the fact that they are their representatives – and about their own rights, they will not be able to hold anyone accountable or exercise their rights.

The low understanding may also indicate that very much remains in terms of public information and education, which would not be surprising considering the scope of change that is involved. It could, however, also be speculated that people – villagers as well as those with a position – pretend to not know about roles and rights, in order to minimise their own responsibilities. It is difficult and demanding, perhaps risky, to exercise your democratic rights and to hold others accountable. Especially for people who are not used to it, it may seem easier to not take on such responsibilities, and instead claim to not have – or to not know of – any ways of influencing. This may not be the case, but if the lack of awareness is to some extent pretended and a sign of “laziness”, this is crucial for the possibilities of introducing liberal democracy. If people are “given” democracy without having fought for it, they may not be motivated to use and protect it. As will be seen, there are highly motivated rural Cambodians who actively challenge injustice and defend their rights. Where this happens may also be where there are best chances for democracy to be established. A question then is whether democracy can be extended to and upheld also in places where people have not had to conquer it.

Though, at the time of the research, the pattern of avoidance and compliance was still dominant in the two villages, there were also signs of change in villagers’ attitudes and strategies towards the authorities.

In one of the case study villages, a conflict had been building up over the years about access to some nearby fishing lakes as businessmen from outside have paid for the sole fishing right in an increasing number of the lakes – and defended this right with armed guards. Though this deprives villagers of a crucial source of livelihood, until recently they did not dare to protest. *If we try, they'll shoot us. They are big people.* (Villager (m) January 2000).

Something changed however. At the time of the research, villagers widely claimed that the district authorities are responsible for the problem while, according to the Commune Chief, the commune has been accused by higher levels of supporting the villagers. Some
villagers did ask and did get some advice at the commune on how to proceed in order to bring a complaint about their exclusion from the fishing lakes. The main initiatives, however, came from people in a nearby village, who have relatives at the provincial court and thus were reasonably familiar with the procedures. The protests included a number of petitions as well as a demonstration. Hundreds of villagers from several villages put their thumbprints on petitions that were taken to the authorities at various levels as well as to human rights organisations. And when that did not work, hundreds of villagers jointly and openly disobeyed the ban on fishing, which made the authorities and businessmen, at least temporarily, withdraw the armed guards and tolerate the villagers’ fishing.

Though villagers were far from confident that this would last, they believed that there would be renewed protests if necessary. *In the past, people feared the authorities. Now, people know their rights, and they are brave enough to make complaints* (Villager (m) February 2000)

Several factors seem to have combined to determine the villagers’ inclination to oppose “big people”, i.e. authorities and businessmen. Fishing is crucial for the population’s survival in the area, and as villagers were denied access to more and more lakes, they seemed to see no other alternative than to disobey the ban. *If villagers stay at home, they'll die. If they go, they may die.* (Villager (m) January 2000) Threats to their livelihood have not always made Cambodian villagers openly oppose the authorities, however, while in this case, some villagers even asked the commune officials for advice. This indicates that villagers’ relation to and perception of the commune have changed. The Commune Chief, too, emphasises the commune’s "development" tasks and its role of serving the population, and holds the district or higher authorities responsible when the commune is not able to do so. *Our job is to serve the villagers. But when the Ministry sells the lakes, what can we do?* (Commune Chief (m) February 2000)

Still, despite changing relations to and roles and attitudes of commune authorities, the protests also required leadership and knowledge. Without the initiatives from a nearby village, people in the village of this study would probably not have written any petitions or gone in a demonstration – though they might next time.

In the other village, the general unhappiness with the village leadership increased during the time of the field research. Villagers also got increasingly outspoken – to the research team as well as to each other – about the misconduct and abuse of power by the two most powerful men in the village. Many villagers continued to believe that there was nothing they could do about it, since especially one of the two men was strongly supported by the Commune Chief.
A few individuals, however, became more and more determined to actually try to change the village leadership, and some of them expressed optimism about the chances to succeed: *It's democracy now. If villagers protest, they [the authorities] must listen.* (Villager (m) March 2000) After the last visit, the research team also learned that these people had written a formal complaint, signed by most villagers, and taken it to the commune and district authorities. It was unclear, however, whether the authorities would consider the complaint.

What seems to have happened in this village is that, as the misconduct and power abuse by the two leaders became more apparent and more relevant to people’s livelihood, villagers reacted more strongly than before. Meanwhile, a few alternative leaders were emerging. VDC-members and a few others who felt dejected and marginalised by the leader, increasingly discussed possible solutions, and other villagers who did not trust the existing leadership started to turn to them for advice and hope for their initiatives. A few individuals were thus gradually accepted as informal leaders, and themselves gradually accepted that role. As they had at least some level of familiarity with the provincial authorities as well as enough motivation and ideas of how to proceed with a protest, they could motivate others to join. Listening to villagers, with this recent experience, it also seemed much more likely that next time a similar problem occurs, they too would approach the authorities to demand their rights.

The two examples of villagers protesting and challenging the authorities indicate that villagers’ attitudes and strategies are changing. With the transition to peace and as the authorities’ tasks alter towards “development” or more livelihood and living standard related issues, their actions and conduct get more relevant to people’s everyday well-being and concerns, which may make people less indifferent. As villagers get used to the idea of receiving something good from the authorities, they develop positive expectations, and may protest when these are not fulfilled. Also, villagers’ at least to some extent increasing contacts and familiarity with the authorities may gradually make them more inclined to actively resist, rather than keeping away, when the authorities abuse their power and violate villagers’ rights.

At the same time, changes in attitudes among local authorities – towards more interest in and commitment to the population’s well-being – may also make local officials more inclined to support and protect villagers’ rights when others violate them, as well as make villagers actively seek the authorities’ support.
Conclusions

The starting point of this paper is that reconciliation after serious internal conflicts requires (re)legitimisation of political institutions and practices. Only legitimate, competent and dedicated authorities can (re)gain the population’s trust and turn negative experiences and expectations into positive ones, which is all necessary for democratic relations to develop and profound reconciliation to occur.

In the case of rural Cambodia, the building of local legitimacy implies overcoming a number of deeply rooted obstacles in socio-political culture. This paper has illustrated some such obstacles but also pointed to some openings.

While Cambodian local authorities’ mandate has rarely been clearly regulated and announced, among the main tasks during the 1980s were recruitment of forced labour and soldiers, and distribution of land, which for obvious reasons both opened for perceptions of injustice and insecurity, and rendered the authorities feared. Villagers talk about how soldiers and workers died in malaria and their families did not get the help that they had been promised, and vividly tell stories of how people used to run away from the village in order to not be recruited. There were also clearly suspicions of local officials favouring their relatives and friends regarding for example land distribution. Villagers’ common strategy of keeping quiet and (hiding or) obeying was thus scarcely surprising but probably fairly rational.

In many aspects the local authorities’ role has been gradually changing. From the late 1990s, partly with international influence and intervention, a largely unregulated mandate dominated by security and conflict issues has been superseded by more well defined “development” tasks, such as provision of infrastructure and other services.

Regulated and relevant tasks would have a chance to create better relations and more positive expectations on the authorities. Much of what the two case studies indicate may however seem quite discouraging. While position holders widely claim to not want their positions, villagers express very limited knowledge and understanding of their new tasks and responsibilities, and of villagers’ rights. Rather, they still express largely negative views of the local authorities. The by far most frequently mentioned current task of the local authorities is conflict resolution, which however most villager claim has no relevance for them, is not fair, too expensive and sometimes not even available.

A remaining sense of arbitrariness and lack of accountability in authorities’ conduct, as well as remaining perceptions of legal injustices and insecurity thus pose serious problems in terms of local democracy and state legitimacy. Since most villagers still do not expected
much good from the authorities, the common – or at least claimed – strategy has remained one of silence and compliance, keeping away from the authorities and when necessary doing as you are told.

As discussed, position holders’ claimed reluctance and villagers’ claimed lack of knowledge and obedience may not always truly reflect their feelings and behaviour. Villagers may be more aware of their rights than they say, but for various reasons reluctant to exercise these rights. They may also be more prepared to resist instructions from the authorities than they say, as they have in the past.

In any case, it is also important to recognise the huge changes in socio-political culture, relations, practices and perceptions that the introduction of (externally designed) liberal democratic structures and procedures imply in rural Cambodia, and that they have been in place (or rather under development) only for a very short time. Despite remaining obstacles and drawbacks, there are prospects for improvement.

Notwithstanding villagers’ claimed lack of understanding of the local authorities’ roles and responsibilities and of their own rights (or their hesitation to use these rights), they undeniably meet local officials more frequently in their development related role. As familiarity increases, as the authorities’ tasks get more relevant to people’s daily concerns and well-being, and as arbitrariness and uncertainty give way for regulation and division of tasks and responsibilities, positive expectations are likely to develop, and the reasons increase to be proactive rather than keeping away.

There are already indications that relations are changing and villagers’ strategies are moving from compliance and avoidance towards occasional active and open resistance. Despite claims of distance and unfamiliarity, there are numerous examples of that people do not quietly accept instructions and actions by local authorities. Rather, village and commune officials who abuse their power are being challenged, as are people with development responsibilities that they do not fulfil.

In one place, hundreds of villagers protested against authorities violating their fishing rights, while also seeking advice from other authorities. In another place, a perhaps unexpected outcome of the efforts to improve local governance, was that the new development mandate and resources made some local leaders’ power abuse more apparent, which led to open and organised challenging of their leadership. In both cases, the issues that caused protests were crucial for villagers’ livelihood, or even survival. But the protests were also caused by some villagers’ increased familiarity with authority institutions and
procedures, by the emergence of alternative and determined leaders, by positive expectations on the authorities, and by people daring to protest when the expectations are not fulfilled.

Examples of villagers not silently accepting the local authorities’ power abuse and violation of people’s rights indicate that expectations are emerging among rural Cambodians of competent, committed and accountable local authorities that are responsible for and act in the population’s socio-economic interests. Though such attitudes will obviously take time to be consolidated, their existence – and the acting upon them – point towards prospects for political reconciliation through (re)legitimisation of local authorities.
References


