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Abstract This article outlines a case study of building participation in squatter communities in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The building blocks for participation are identified and the mechanisms used, Participatory Action Research and a Savings and Credit Scheme, are examined as examples of processes others might use for similar purposes. This analysis is provided by an expatriate who worked with the organization from its inception and includes reflections on their part in the process.

"*key words*"

Participation; Community Development; Capacity-Building; Squatters

BUILDING PARTICIPATION IN SQUATTER COMMUNITIES IN PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA

Introduction

There are many mechanisms that may be used to build participation in communities. This article outlines some of the mechanisms used working with squatter communities in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, by the author in an organisation called the Urban Sector Group (USG). USG was constituted in 1993 as a formal organisation but had grown from an informal association of volunteers, local non-governmental organisation (NGO) workers, and some expatriate advisors. The article begins by setting the context for the work discussing briefly the history of Cambodia and describing the urban population. It then moves onto discuss the cultural context of the work and then outlines the building blocks for participation. Each of these building blocks or components are discussed to demonstrate their use in the mechanisms of a savings and credit programme and used to build participation.

Cambodian Context

Cambodia is located in south-east Asia bordering Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. It has been subject to a period of colonisation by the French, a long and bloody civil war, and a period of occupation by the Vietnamese. The population is approaching fourteen million of which approximately ten per cent is urban (World Bank 2011). The people live with the impact of both the Vietnam War and their own civil war. US forces carried out bombing raids into Cambodia with some estimates showing that 2,756,941 tons of bombs were dropped between 1969 and 1973 alone making it possibly 'the most bombed country in history' (Owen and Kiernan, 2006). The Khmer Rouge (KR) and Lon Nol government troops heavy fighting between 1970 and 1972 caused large-scale internal migration with some reporting over two million displaced people resulted from this fighting. (Mysliewicz, 1988). It is estimated that approximately 1.7 million Cambodian people were victims of the Khmer Rouge regime. (Fawthrop and Jarvis, 2004; Mysliwiec, 1988; Kiernan, 2002; Ledgerwood, 2002; Coates, 2005.

Cambodia is a Buddhist country with no strong sense of collective social responsibility which means that Wats (Temples) are a prominent feature of bonding activities outside of family life. The family, rather than the community, is 'the key unit of organisation' in Cambodian society (Cunningham et al, forthcoming). In a women's empowerment group session, Pearson (2010: 37-8) found that there was a lack of skill in assessment of 'how to apply varying levels of trust to different people' and therefore the Cambodian women said 'the simplest solution was not to take any risks and to trust only immediate family'. Cambodian society is very hierarchical, although the population that remained after the civil war had a majority of female-headed households. This was unusual as women in positions of leadership was unknown. In the slum communities, there were many female community leaders.

The levels of poverty evidenced by the Human Development Index (HDI), which measures how a population meets various threshold levels, including health and education as well as their standard of living, ranks Cambodia 87th out of 135 countries. The HDI estimates 18.5% of the population will not survive to the age of 40 (UNDP, 2009). This context is important as Pearson (2010: 26) suggests "The psychosocial effects that accrue in such circumstances, when combined with influential cultural factors, are extremely relevant to any attempts to develop capacity, because they create and maintain inhibitors of change".

Land and Property Ownership

Prior to the arrival of the French, all land belonged to the King. After independence from the French, the Cambodian constitution stated that private property rights would be recognised (Simbolon, 2004). This was revoked by the KR in 1975 when they abolished the right to private property transferring ownership of all property to the state. After the defeat of the KR by the Vietnamese Army in 1979 the displaced population returned to their provinces and people returned to the cities. The Vietnamese supported government created 'collective property rights'. (Boreak, 2000: 16) A short time after the Vietnamese left Cambodia in 1989, the government redistributed land rights in rural areas, but any claims of ownership 'before 1975 were invalidated'.

Gender Inequality is evidenced in land ownership and rights. After the KR regime, there were many female-headed households who were initially successful in obtaining land rights but the 1989 legislation on land reform has been viewed as having a negative effect on women (USAID 2011) and research by Oxfam showed that one in five female-headed households was landless (ADB, 2004).

The situation in Phnom Penh was not simple as many former property owners were deceased. The government decided to wipe the slate clean and allocated ownership on a 'first come first served' basis. This meant that if you occupied a building on 7th January 1979 you could obtain ownership rights. (Boreak, 2000). Formal ownership legislation was only reintroduced in 1993 and people could only claim ownership to land made available after the end of the KR regime, namely 1979.

Urban Sector Group (USG)

The transitional government following the Paris Peace Accords in 1991 were supported by a UN resolution created a Transitional Authority (UNTAC) which worked from 1992-1993 to help administer the government and run elections which took place in 1993. These elections resulted in a coalition government and the creation of a constitution which allowed local NGOs to develop.

The Urban Sector Group (USG) was one of these and was established in August 1993 as an informal grouping of twenty-four local and seven international NGOs working with, or interested in, issues affecting the urban poor. The Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) also had an important role in formation of the USG. In April 1994, USG members voted to formalise the organisational structure and start long-term activities to support development in squatter areas.

In addition, a one year Trainer/Facilitator post was created to work with USG in Organisational Development, including developing its administration and finance systems and skills, which position I held.

Organisation Structure

In March 1994, after the municipal workshops, USG elected 4 people to be the 'staff' of the group. The staff were a Coordinator, a part-time Administrator, a part-time Accountant and a part-time Secretary. All of the people elected were from local NGOs, none from the community. Between March and November 1994, USG decided to work out its structure as an NGO.

The structure chosen during the Strategic Planning Workshops was as follows:

> A General Assembly – selected and elected a Steering Committee, approving the Mission Statement and making long-range goals; five sub-Committees created
> A Steering Committee - responsible for preparing the mission statement; hiring and firing staff; monitoring and evaluating; made up of 11 members including the Expatriate Advisors and the Expatriate Trainer/Facilitator
> A Coordinator and six staff positions including Programme Officers working on Community Organising; Savings; Networking and Pilot Projects

It was the organisation's aim to enable the communities to strengthen themselves by working together, by being able to express their needs and by receiving assistance, to carry out activities to reach their own goals. The staff were not, however, professional community workers and had little exposure to community organising methods. For this reason, an expatriate Trainer/Facilitator was employed to support them and this was the role the author took. However, this structure was designed to enable maximum participation by community members and community leaders.

Building Blocks

The building blocks that will be outlined now indicate all that was needed to build the group into an organisation. These were: Development; Capacity Development; Community Development: Enabling Environment: Ownership; Understanding Cultural Context.

These words need to be unpacked as some may be contested, for example, what is community?; what is development? So, it is important to consider the language and practice we use, as the language we use relates to our behaviour (Capra, 1996).

There are many definitions of community and emotions attached to those definitions. Eriksson (2011, 405) defines it clearly as 'a set of variables', one being a variable of 'place', one being a variable of 'common interest'. Using this definition we can define USG in two ways, as a community of common interest and also within that a set of communities of place. However, these are using European definitions and as Eriksson herself says, in Sweden, 'the idea of community is slightly problematic. There is no obvious translation of the concept and it is difficult to find a Swedish concept that covers the meanings given to community'. The same can be said in Cambodia.

What is Development? I was working under the umbrella of 'development', which has many alternate descriptions: poverty reduction; international humanitarian aid; etc., but its many theories talk about working for desirable change. But who says what this change is? I prefer Chambers (1997) definition of development as good change. And this is what I would say we were working towards in our organisation. There were barriers to achieving this 'good change' in Cambodia at the time I was working. It was just after the first democratic elections, communication and infrastructure were poor and people still had the lack of trust that came from the civil war period. Although there were some small community groups before the election, civil society was weak.

An OECD report (2006: 7-9) states that capacity development was seen as a 'technical process' that used a 'transfer of knowledge' model. There was little consideration of the context within

which capacity development took place and a tendency to seek the 'right answers' rather than an appropriate solution. As a consequence, there was also little thought about transfer of ownership of developments. A change has taken place in viewing capacity development as a process that should be 'led from within' and therefore issues such as governance, social inclusion and the building of social capital are important factors in successful capacity development.

> *Capacity development is understood as the process whereby people, organisations and society as a whole unleash, strengthen, create, adapt and maintain capacity over time (OECD 2006: 14)*

Community Development has many definitions, but can be simply identified as 'broad-based change for the benefit of all community members' (Kelly and Caputo, 2005, 235). In order for that change to occur, there must be capacity within the community which means 'the human, physical, financial and social resources' are there to help meet identified needs (Kelly and Caputo, 2005, 236).

There are problems though with simply importing Community Development (CD) theory and practice as Erickson (xxxx) discusses. In particular, of Community Development practice and theory built from the colonial experience. Also, the concept of 'community' may not have shared understanding as Eriksson (2010) states, 'there is no obvious translation of the concept' in Sweden. Similarly, understandings of community in Cambodia differ with most relating this word to an administrative division rather than a unit of common interest and 'words such as cooperation, participation…often raise negative images among the people' (UNESCAP, xxxx: 17). As with other Western theory, for example the application of Western therapeutic models and psychology, there are problems importing and using concepts that are not familiar to the culture you are working in. For example, there are problems with Western psychological therapy being directly applied to a Cambodian and Buddhist context (Cunningham et al, forthcoming).

The table below adapted from Gilchrist (2004), breaks down the three primary Community Development models used in community work. When I say I was doing this work, what kind of Community Development work do I mean? I would say myself and USG were using a mix of of Pluralist-liberal and Radical (conflict) community development..

Model	View of Society	View of Problem	Intervention	Examples
Conservative	Consensus (conforming to society's norms)	Individual or community pathology	Imparting morality Administering to needs Delivering services to marginalised groups	State sponsored community development projects (encourages local responsibility)
Pluralist / liberal	Made up of different interest groups with differing amounts of	'disadvantaged' groups need improved representation	Lobbying, working towards representation of interests by	Local authority neighbourhood workers, equalities officers

	power		marginalised groups	
Radical (conflict)	Society as unjust -conflict of interest between classes	Injustice is inherent in the social structure and the economic system	Community action towards consciousness raising Campaigning for social change	Radical education of marginalised communities

Within the pluralist theory of community work is a focus on micro-change and Popple (1995: 33) identifies part of this as 'equipping of groups and individuals for effective participation' and this approach can be seen within the Community Organising (CO) Programme of USG. The Savings Programme was closely linked with the CO programme.

An enabling environment is essential and by this I mean structures of power and influence and institutions of power and influence. The environment we were working in as stated was of a developing civil society. NGOs were new and therefore the structures who held power and influence were trying to understand the role of the NGOs and what power they had. With the UN and international NGOs encouraging Cambodian NGOs to develop, they were almost forced into accepting these local organisations had a role. However, their input into institutions of power was weak.

With these building blocks, it is possible to identify how the mechanisms which will be outlined now were used to build participation.

The Mechanisms

There were two main mechanisms used to encourage development of community leadership and the development of an identity for the organisations. First, was Participatory Action Research (PAR). We brought people together to learn English, Management, Communication Skills and then Research Skills. The community leaders and their deputies and any others who were interested, came together to learn.

We wanted to tackle first the issue of poor urban people and the image the government used when talking about them. – often they were described in the media and at meetings as prostitutes and thieves. So, we used research skills to develop questionnaires, a kind of census, about the populations living in the urban poor areas. A small group of community leaders and activists were trained on the computer to input and analyse the data. The results were then shared between all. The reflections on what they knew about themselves and how they wanted to represent themselves were powerful and influential in building social capital. Melucci (1985:793) describes collective identity as 'a shared definition' and says that 'shared' means the identity is 'constructed and negotiated through a repeated process of 'activation' of social relationships connecting the actors'.

The community members decided to celebrate themselves, developing a community event, we had art projecct competition to design a logo for the organisation. We had a dream house

competition, people designed small models of their dreams and we presented the results in an exhibition and invited international NGOs and government officials and the press and TV to cover the event. Through this, links were made to external agencies.

Saving was the first step in organising and building community cohesiveness. The model for the Savings Program came from Indian groups such as SPARC (see links for further information) and its people's movements, NSDF and Mahila Milan, through ACHR. Each identifiable small area with an identity-name of its own, nominated a community leader. This leader was responsible for the coordination of the savings and credit scheme within their community. The only requirement was that people saved every day, and this could be a very small amount, 50 riel, 100 riel. 100 riel would be about 25 cents. After people had saved for a specified period, they could apply for credit within their community. A small scale loan would be grated if they had been good savers. This was a binding mechanism in that all saved, all shared responsibility for the scheme and the community leaders developed trust within their communities. There were of course small problems along the way, but nothing that they could not deal with. The savings process built self-confidence as money was saved and it also built trust between the members of the savings group and new skills with basic book-keeping. In addition, some communities used part of their savings to begin projects of their own. One community's savers funded a garbage collection project which benefited the whole community.

As the UNESCAP (1996: 6) report on savings and credit programmes states, 'they can often become a breakthrough point and spark off other initiatives to improve the living conditions of the settlements.' This is true of the USG savings programme. However, the problems with trust raised earlier and identified by Pearson (2010) were a key barrier to implementing a mechanism such as a savings and credit scheme as can be seen in this quote from a Cambodian Community Leader in the UNESCAP report (1996: 18)

> "How I started a saving group in my community. Some friends came to invite my community to form a saving group. They explained that savings groups aimed at improving the situation of squatter communities. I did not believe their explanation."

Reflection

In thinking about my input, I realise I had some assumptions – that the structure created – with paid staff, was a good thing as long as the Community Leaders were the managing committee. However, the staff did not like the fact that they were not on the committee. This caused some conflict. This led to lots of discussion about the formation of an organisation and whether this had been a good thing. Cornwall and Coelho (2007: 9) say that it is not enough to try to create 'structures of participation' as participants may bring with them into these spaces memories of their experiences of 'paternalism or prejudice in everyday encounters with state institutions' (Cornwall and Coelho (2007: 12). Participation can be intimidating and therefore there is a challenge to be mindful of this to 'overcome the embedded inequalities' (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007:13).

After a period of a year in fact, the organisation split into two. The community leaders formed their own federation and decided to work on their own goals. The staff remained as an advocacy organisation and facilitator for others wanting to work with the federation. I was the only expatriate, and therefore despite my intention and goal to just be a facilitator, they would often put me in a position of making decisions. This was very difficult to negotiate sometimes. I had made the assumption that people wanted the power being offered and as I said earlier, for the

women, this was unusual, but in fact once they felt they had developed their skills, they were happy to work inj these positions.

Overall, I think the two mechanisms used were good to develop a strong sense of unity between the communities and I believe the PAR was very important in creating a sense of identity, a shared sense of who we are came out and this skill also enabled people to start thinking about themselves as people who had something to offer. The research skills were in fact valuable as a commodity and International NGOs began to hire the researchers to carry out research for them on different issues, health, education etc. This then led to community leaders networking on their own with external agencies. So, these two mechanisms were successful in terms of community capacity building.

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