

Cambodia’s Rural Communities and Social Capital Formation: Lessons Learned from Villages in Tram Kak District, Takeo Province

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I. Background

Cambodia has passed over a long way of its darkest period in history since the beginning of 1979 from nearly four years of almost total destruction of physical, social and human capital. The country has gradually taken a hop to normalcy and rebuilt from the vast destruction after signing of the 1991 Paris Peace Accords. Despite the remarkable progress on economic, social and political fronts since the end of several decades of isolation and civil unrest, Cambodia remains one of the poorest countries in the world and relies heavily on foreign aid.

Today’s development discourse reflects many of the principal elements of an effective partnership, participation and local ownership of the development process. Donors have only quite recently begun to channel support to grassroots associations – and this almost exclusively through intermediary NGOs, only a limited number of which have the requisite grassroots linkages, on-the-ground presence and skills. Some initiatives such as CEDAC¹ Farmer Associations (FAs) have achieved impressive results and offer important potential opportunities for learning, replication and scaling-up.

II. Purpose of the Study

With respect to what happening in its contemporary history, this study aims to explore lessons learned of CEDAC’s community development strategies through the formation of FAs and its implications on the social capital build-up for self-promoting development in Cambodia’s rural communities.

III. Analytical Framework

An analytical model (see Figure 3) is used for the discussion of the empirical data from the case study. The model builds around the concepts of structural and cognitive social capital and the associated dimensions of “community events, informal networks, associations, village leadership, and links

with external agencies” used by Krishnamurthy (1999).

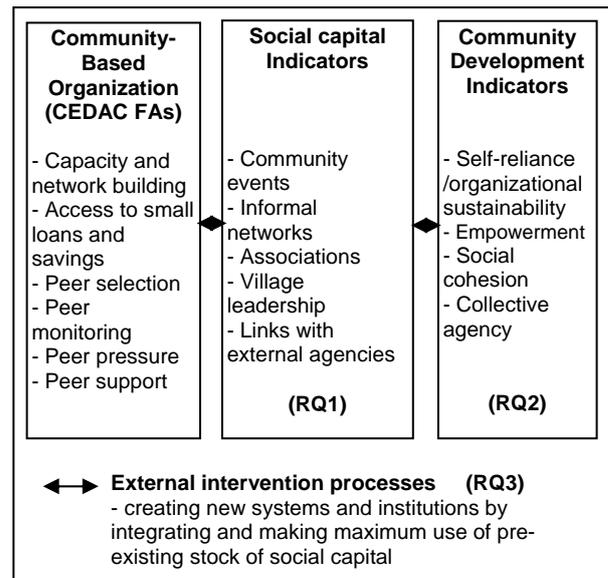


FIGURE 3: ANALYTICAL MODEL FOR THE CASE STUDY

Through studying a successful case from CEDAC FAs model, the research first seeks evidence of social capital build-up since the formation of the groups RQ1 (research question one). Based on this evidence, the research explores what implications this social capital build-up and the associated external intervention processes realistically have on the capacity of the rural villagers to organize themselves for wider community-driven development RQ2 (research question two). Lastly, the study examines the external intervention processes and identify the causal relationship between these processes and pre-existing stock of social capital formation RQ3 (research question three).

IV. Methodologies

The study used three different methods to collect data: (1) field observation; (2) field interview (household survey, individual interview and group discussion); and (3) document review. The primary data was collected between August and September 2009 in six villages located in one commune (Cheang Tong commune) in Tram Kak district,

¹ Centre d’Etude et de Développement Agricole Cambodgien (Cambodian Center for Study and Development in Agriculture)

Takeo province, Cambodia. A total of 94 households (member and non-members of FAs) were randomly selected for the interview from the six villages.

A local project, namely “Improving Livelihood of Small Farmers in Tram Kak” (ILFARM-TK) implemented by CEDAC and supported by JICA was examined in context of the above objectives. Particularly the study aims to compare of what happening before, during and after the project with particular reference to social capital formation.

V. Research Summary

1. Changes to Social Relations

- The project has developed a complex farmer’s network weaved by different types of units, at each local administrative level and by thematic sectors (agriculture production, savings and credit, women, youth etc.).
- The project has improved good collaboration and networking between farmers, especially at village level and commune level. Farmers have formed into groups or FAs that make them easier to share knowledge and information with each other and conduct collective action to sell their products and to influence local government.
- There is a closer relationship between farmers and the local government, especially in participation of village and commune meetings to discuss about rehabilitating and renovating village infrastructure. In addition, FA leaders/representatives are frequently invited to attend the meeting with commune council.
- Women play more active role in community development planning and implementation since the formation of FAs.

2. Changes to Organizational Capacity

- The project’s agricultural innovations are widely disseminated from farmer to farmer within the village and beyond the village level.
- There are some existing human resources in the villages who are able to provide assistance on agricultural innovations after the intervention of the project.
- The improvement from applying the agricultural practices positively effects family income. For instance, the capacity for generating income from on-farm activities has increased about 55% in between 2006 and 2009.
- Access to credit is much easier than before the project intervention. Villagers can now approach FA in their own village for savings and credit with lower interest rate. Even though the level of interest rate payment is similar to microfinance institutions (MFIs), the interest is their own and it has reduced the cash outflow from the village to outsiders.

3. Sustainability

To ensure long term supports for the established FAs and sustainable livelihood improvement of small landholders, the project has initiated local networks for local development, which is characterized by improving strong cooperation between local authorities, particularly commune council, pagoda committee, FA committee and other stakeholders.

- CEDAC has consulted with local government authorities prior to implementation of the project. In addition, official partnership arrangement has been made between the project activities and relevant public institutions for longer support to the established FA/clusters in the target area when the project ends.
- By June 2009 after the project intervention, 26% of the established FAs are able to self-manage and self-finance while 32% and 42% has been rated respectively as learning progress and poor-performing FAs.
- The project has initiated cooperation between religious authorities and FA committees for the local development activities particularly in community-based environmental protection and natural resource management program. Currently, at least 30 established FAs are working with religious authorities and commune councils to initiate and enforce local regulation for natural resources conservation.

VI. Conclusions

Major findings and some practical implications are as follows:

- Properly designed external interventions through community-based organizations particularly CEDAC FAs can bring positive changes to social relations and organizational capacity for wider community development.
- The formation of FAs is not only increasing the agricultural productivity, providing low-cost alternative of loans or savings, and transferring new skills to others, but also breaking the vicious circle of institutional exclusion, giving a collective voice, a group identity and mutual support to the poor and disadvantaged (such as women).
- The interaction within the group at and beyond their group meetings has created a greater sense of collective consciousness, trust and confidence to cope with stressful times, discuss household problems, and share social practices and market information. The network has gradually changed perceptions among farmers and established more social networks and relationship in and outside the village as well as with other organizations.