

# ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH GOOD GOVERNANCE

## Good Governance

Good governance depends on transparency, accountability, predictability and participation. Transparency entails low-cost access to relevant information. Accountability is the capacity to call public officials to account for their actions. Predictability results primarily from laws and regulations that are clear. Participation is required to obtain reliable information and to serve as a reality check and watchdog over government action. Clearly none of these pillars in a fully developed sense is particularly strong in Cambodia,<sup>5</sup> especially given its recent past. Nevertheless, during the PPA most participants were keen to talk about related issues, the results of which are presented here.

## Delivery of Government Services

Up to 8 percent of FGD participants attributed their poverty to poor governance, such as corrupt practices associated with the misallocation of aid projects, policing functions that discriminate against the poor and the misallocation of development projects. The major issues relating to governance in the delivery of government services, as identified by FGD participants, were the extra-official charges imposed by teachers on their children attending school, loss of control over local fishing resources and denial of access to forests. Many of the poor do not like the extra-official charges imposed by teachers. They argue that it is already very difficult to

send their children to school, particularly if they have a large number of school-age children, which is often the case. There is a recognition that teachers are forced to survive on inadequate salaries, but many villagers think that a considerable number of teachers still use their position to extract as much as they can from local communities. One PPA participant's disgruntlement in Takeo illustrated such perceptions by some of the poor in relation to the provision of teaching services at the village level:

*We accept that teachers are underpaid and that they also need to live, that is why we provide them with some rice even though we often go hungry ourselves. Some teachers are not contented with the support we provide them and want to take money off our children....They do this by forcing them to buy books purchased by the teacher, pencils, paper and snacks. This is money we do not have. But worse than this, they try to plunder local resources and even get access to land....Of course there are some really good teachers, or so we have heard: It's just that they do not teach in the school attended by our children.*

Teachers trying their best to teach local children is all most PPA participants expect. What they strongly resented were attempts by teachers to "rent-seek" off them, the argument being that the poor have very little by way of cash or other material goods to give away to anyone. These PPA participants also recognized that teachers should not have to face the same hardships as themselves. Realistically though, many teachers in rural areas, while marginally better off than the very poor, are only living just above the poverty line.

Food-for-work programs appear to be very popular with FGD participants, and, as will be argued in the

<sup>5</sup> See, Asian Development Bank, *Cambodia: Enhancing Governance for Sustainable Development*, Manila, Programs Department (West), October 2000.

concluding part of this report, should not only be retained but also expanded to ideally cover all poor communities. Unfortunately, many participants complained that the good intentions of the Government to target the poor were often undermined by local authorities implementing the program. This complaint also applied to the distribution of emergency flood aid. It is symptomatic of one of the important reasons why large numbers of Cambodians who participated in the PPA want to replace existing commune leaders, although in the upland provinces this opinion was infrequently expressed.

A participant from a commune in Pursat province described many people's feelings regarding respect for local authorities:

*Our commune leader has two wives that he always spoils with gifts. We learned that we were being provided with food to upgrade the very poor road that goes through our village, but we worked for nearly a month and received nothing. It was a terrible time because the commune leader told us that we had to move 3 cubic meters of soil each day to qualify for food aid, which we did. This meant we could not go to the forest to forage for food. By the end of the month we were practically starving. Our complaints led nowhere. Meanwhile the two wives of the commune leader were getting fatter and fatter from doing nothing.... It's always been like this in our commune where the friends and relatives of the commune authorities get rich while we stay poor.... A similar thing is happening right now with flood relief [early November 2000] and will continue to happen.*

During that Pursat PPA, the participants expressed extreme annoyance with the local authorities but were reluctant to pursue the issue to the point where they would advocate collectively the removal of those officials. In the interviews that were conducted by the PPA team, such a desire was clearly indicated.

The people in this PPA did not direct all their complaints at local, district, commune or village authorities. There are also complaints about the Department of Fisheries, Department of Forestry and the Ministry of Environment, even though few of the villagers can differentiate between the agencies concerned, preferring instead to subsume them under the rubric of the Government.

It has been noted in Chapter 4 how many villagers are concerned about the diminishing freshwater fish catch. Fish, of course, constitute the most important source of protein to most Cambodians, with the exception of

upland ethnic groups in the Northeastern Mountain region. There was a litany of complaints from PPA participants in the Mekong Plain region directed at the Department of Fisheries for attempts to impose a "resource" tax upon local communities that have the right to fish in lakes and rivers close to where they live. This same department has attempted to charge a "usage" tax for the right of local people to use their own boats to go fishing. None of these taxes is legal, or at least this is what the people believe, though some, particularly the ethnic Vietnamese, know they have to pay them anyway.

While this is a major problem for the very poor as they lack the financial resources to comply with such demands, an even larger problem for all the poor is loss of local fishing grounds to commercial fishing activities. Local people only have rights in these lots if the owners confer such rights on them. This practice was denounced by a FGD participant in Kandal province:

*The lot owners work with the fisheries people to deny us the right to fish in areas we used to fish in. These areas are close to where we have always lived, and should we dare go and fish there we will be chased away by the armed guards. They are not frightened to shoot at us—look at the way the young boys run away when you came by boat. This is because they thought you were armed and going to shoot at them. They are frightened, and we are frightened. You should also know that in the past when the lot was abolished, we did not take all the fish we can catch but the lot owners do as they want and can sell whatever fish they do not want to someone to make fish paste.*

The problems with the Department of Forestry are equally serious. In Kampong Thom during an FGD, most of the participants related what had happened to them over the past five years with the logging that has been going on in the province's watersheds. When the logging companies moved in they informed villagers that while they had a right to hunt and gather in the watershed, they had no right to cut trees and would be actively prevented from doing so. One participant in Kompong Thom railed against the way "policies" are enforced and at people's new defenselessness:

*This logging company came to our commune and told us that it had exclusive rights to log the trees in the forest. It showed us a signed document from the Government, which we could not understand, but at the same time stood over us with guns to make sure we listened. Less than a month later*

*soldiers employed by that company burned the carts of some of the villagers and shot dead a person that was not even in the forest....We were very frightened but there was nothing we could do. Even the local authorities would or could do nothing.*

Unfortunately, the PPA collected other similar accounts that the villagers wanted to report to authorities but were frightened of harassment by officials who benefit from logging.

As though to make matters worse, the Ministry of Environment, in its haste to demonstrate its commitment to the environment, has created problems for some of the upland ethnic groups in Stung Treng, Rattanakiri and Mondol Kiri. FGD participants in all three provinces talked of difficulties they had with government officials on environmental matters. Local people have been told they must care for the environment and that includes changing traditional hunting practices to avoid killing rare species of wild animals. A Lao man in Stung Treng expressed many people's anger:

*We have been hunting wild animals for a long time. They are an important source of food for us and also symbolize our prowess in the forest. However, in the past we did not hunt so many animals that there were none left to hunt. Now the situation is different—yet we cannot simply decide when we are hungry not to hunt this animal or that animal. As hunters we must hunt what we can. Now we get officials, who by their appearance look as though they have never slept a night in the forest, ordering the local authorities to order us not to hunt.*

There is apprehension on the faces of FGD participants when they talk about such matters, as they believe government officials can come back and arrest them for talking so candidly. The participatory culture fostered in the Ministry of Environment in relation to community-based natural resource management regimes is not evident among the poor of the Northeastern Mountain region.

The problems of the poor with the existing administrative structures in the Northeastern Mountain region are not the same as with the poor in other regions. For instance, in the Mekong Plain region there are complaints about the Government not providing services that could benefit poor farmers. There is no veterinary service, and this contributes to the loss of draft animals, which as this PPA discovered, can be extremely devastating for most poor households, particularly those where such a loss results in a downward spiral to poverty.

Similarly, some FGD participants complained that the Government does not provide officials with technical expertise in agriculture but only skills in extracting money from the poor, as a participant explained in Kampot:

*We are told the Government spends money on training people to be technical experts in agriculture, but we have never seen such people. At the district office there are agricultural officials, but we never see them. In fact the only officials we see are those who give us orders and take money off us.*

Despite their bitter view toward local authorities, nearly 60 percent of FGD participants turn to them for assistance in times of emergency. The reason, they argued, is that only the local authorities can effectively access the Government. Interestingly, only 14 percent of FGD participants in the Coastal region have or would turn to local authorities for assistance, but in the Northeastern Mountain region, a massive 88 percent said they would rely on local authorities. In the Mekong Plain region, nearly 54 percent would seek out public assistance while in the Tonle Sap region it was nearly 67 percent. A Kuy participant in Preah Vihear clarified the situation:

*Few of us speak the Khmer language well enough to communicate directly with government officials even if we wanted to. Therefore we have to rely on local authorities that can speak both our language and that of the Khmer.*

During the PPA, it was observed that when local authorities in the Northeastern Mountain region are of a similar ethnic background to other people in the local community, they are more widely respected than many local authorities are in the lowland regions of Cambodia. Relatives, because they are also poor and unable to assist during a real emergency, like neighbors, are less likely to be called upon, as they too are considered poor and powerless.

## Limited Coverage of Civil Society Organizations

Despite the proliferation of civil society organizations in Cambodia since 1993, less than 10 percent of the PPA sites had any active involvement by an NGO or community-based organization, either in the recent past or currently. Indeed, few FGD participants had even heard about NGOs although some were aware that such organizations existed in other villages. This did not mean that

FGD participants who had experience with NGOs had negative attitudes toward such organizations. In Svay Rieng, where a small number of NGOs have been active for at least a decade, one woman in her mid-40s talked of the positive impact from such organizations:

*Before an NGO came along I was very poor. No one from the Government would or could assist me but the NGO took me aside, listened carefully to my problems and then arranged for villagers in a similar position to meet together and discuss our problems. We were encouraged to come up with our own solutions, which made all of us feel very happy, and then we discussed whether the solutions were realistic or not. After that the NGO supported us with poultry, pigs, medical assistance and a limited amount of money. It also encouraged us to send our children to school. I think NGOs are good for the poor because they really try to understand us.*

Some PPA participants were wary of NGOs because of experiences they had encountered. In the province of Kampong Thom, according to participants there, representatives of an alleged NGO, visited a poor village. They told people that if they joined in demonstrations against the Government, international donors would help them because these donors did not like the Government. Explained one of the villagers:

*We were told by this NGO that the reason we are poor is because of the corrupt Government, which is really only supported by local authorities that are also corrupt. The NGO said that if we joined in demonstrations in Phnom Penh, not only would we get paid for participating, we would get a new government that would really care for us poor people. Some of us were tempted to join because money was waved in front of our faces, but then we thought if this NGO was so powerful why did it need to rely on us. We also believed that it would be crushed by the Government if the NGO dared challenge it.*

While the poor do not necessarily have an overly positive attitude toward the Government, they do not think NGOs (where they have experience with them) have the same capacity to deliver services as the Government. They think that the Government and NGOs should work together to assist the poor.

At the time of the PPA, few NGOs have actually accessed the poorest communities in Cambodia where assessments were carried out. Security reasons are partly to account, particularly as far as development-oriented NGOs are concerned. This is starting to change as security conditions have improved. Most PPA participants

would welcome a presence by NGOs in their communities, especially if they could make a real difference in their lives.

## Weak Community Mobilization Strategies

Not all the PPA sites had a focal point, such as a temple or mosque, where the local community could meet. Yet it was commonly argued by FGD participants that without a temple or mosque, people were not only unable to observe their religion's traditions but could not join together to assist one another. One Cham religious leader (*hakkam*) in Kratie explained:

*The Khmer think that we Chams are very well organized, that the rich always help the poor. In Islam this is ideally what should occur but then you need to have people that are rich to help the poor. In our village, all people are poor and we do not get assistance from outside. The rich Muslims from Malaysia and places like that are very happy to fund the building of a mosque on the main road, and then they can show it to everyone. As you can see here, we are far from the main road. I think the rich Muslims would never dare travel here....If we had a mosque, at least on Friday we could meet and discuss issues that affect all of us.*

In this particular FGD, the participants also argued that to build an all-weather road or rehabilitate the existing irrigation system (two priorities for these participants) required a good deal of organization at the local community level. This was impossible when people had to spend much of their time, when they were not growing rice or fishing, trying to meet their daily food requirements. It would be impossible for most poor people to give up this type of activity unless food is provided to compensate for time spent on community-based activities.

In Khmer villages, similar points were made in relation to the absence of Buddhist monks. According to an FGD participant in a village of Kampong Chhnang province:

*Buddhism provides us with a meaning in our lives. We are very poor and always have to worry about whether we have enough rice. This would not stop us from supporting several monks if someone would help us build a temple. We know the rich men and women always like sponsoring the construction of a temple, and we would have no objection to them coming to our village—perhaps they could help us with other things as well—but we never get a visit*

*from the rich people... If we had a temple it would be quite easy to get people to meet, and we could then organize ourselves to do things that are really needed in the village.*

Particularly in the lowland regions, FGD participants complained that government officials or even more affluent households would remark that the poor were lazy and incapable of organizing themselves. Such remarks are resented by many of the poor, who point to the fact that their time is occupied just making ends meet.

Referring to a perennial problem with riverbank erosion, a participant in Kampong Cham clarified the argument:

*Unusually heavy flooding this year has caused more erosion of the riverbank than in the past few years, but this is not a new problem. In the past the local authorities used to organize all of us to undertake some necessary rehabilitation work during the dry season and would ensure that we got some rice to eat... Now these same local authorities complain that we won't do what we did in the past, even though they are not offering any rice. The real beneficiaries of this work are not us poor people but those who are well off and live close to the river. Let them provide us with rice, and we will assist them, but otherwise we cannot.*

It appears that the refusal of villagers, or the nonbeneficiaries, to collaborate as they did in the past has led to a deterioration in community-level social relationships.

Another side of the need for greater community mobilization, particularly in relation to preventive health care programs, is that villagers do not think the Government properly informs them on a range of public health issues. Many participants do not know about the reasons why, for example, they should have their children immunized or mothers should breast-feed for as long as possible without introducing other liquids and solids. In Oddar Meanchey, a woman reported:

*When anyone gets sick we have to take responsibility for them, but in our case no one in the community except our older sisters or mothers really knows how to help us. We have heard that in some other villages nursing mothers do not get as sick as their children and are healthier. We wonder whether this is because they have more food to eat, or they also know how to look after themselves better than we do.*

In this context, people would like to have more information but feel the Government is not interested in providing them with much. Exceptionally, it must be

noted, at least in the villages of Oddar Meanchey where the PPA was facilitated, land mine awareness and HIV/AIDS posters could be found. If the poor appear ignorant and misinformed, it is often largely because they do not have access to accurate and reliable information. Disseminating information *en masse* enables the poor to compare and contrast alternative sources of information. This, as many of the FGD participants pointed out, is not something they are able to do currently. The problem is more acute in the upland provinces where ethnic minorities do not understand Khmer. Here information has to be largely visual in nature, utilizing culturally appropriate symbolism. Designing communications strategies and campaigns in Phnom Penh without active input from ethnic minorities, indeed from the poor themselves, are likely to result in unsuccessful forms of information dissemination.

## Conclusion

People in Cambodia want to know more about government programs that are planned or being implemented in areas where they live. Relevant information on public health programs is a concern of the poor, as is information on policies that may have an impact upon their lives. Government policies on access to land by the villagers and policies to safeguard the environment are major concerns, especially given the fact that many of them need access to forests and rivers to meet their subsistence needs. But very few PPA participants had any idea of government policies that affect them, even those designed to reduce poverty. The poor noted repeatedly that the Government has never asked for their views on how it could make their lives better. The situation is even worse in the upland provinces where most of the PPA facilitators found little evidence of local community awareness or understanding of government policies and programs.

There is clearly a need for greater accountability by government officials. Teachers were cited as officials who are not answerable to the local communities they serve. Likewise, commune officials, who are appointed to their jobs, are not always held in high regard because by not being elected they are not answerable to their local communities. On the other hand, at most PPA sites it was recognized that their help in mediating with higher level government officials was necessary, especially during natural disasters. Also, the idea surfaced during PPA discussions that accountability might be greater if NGOs were involved and could monitor the actions of government officials and where appropriate act as facilitators.

In terms of predictability, the PPAs did not directly focus on this pillar of good governance. Laws and regulations imposed by the Government are not often known in advance, nor are they uniformly and effectively enforced. The Vietnamese who participated in the PPAs are especially affected by this lack of predictability, particularly in relation to alleged infringements of fishing laws and regulations. Laws and regulations relating to land, which affect all ethnic groups, are also not evenly applied.

The PPA team members found that the poor are not active participants in developing policies and designing programs that affect their lives. The Government has yet to develop effective mechanisms for the poor

to participate in decisions that affect them. Generally, participants did not know how their voices could be heard. Although NGOs have played a limited role to date in the communities where most of the participants are living, most PPA participants welcomed an expanded presence by NGOs in their communities.

It would appear that access to better information would be a first step in empowering the poor to participate in local decision making and for their voices to be heard at the national level. As reflected in the PPA discussions, villagers are generally skeptical toward the Government. And yet at the same time they want the Government to develop a greater interest in their plight.