



Aufnahme: M. G6rgen 2005

Female Councilor and Planning Committee. Siem Reap Province

Female Councilor Forums as a capacity building in the decentralization process of Cambodia

A personal view of an unforgettable stay in Cambodia

Maraile G6rgen

Background

In 2001, the Royal Government of Cambodia introduced the decentralization reform in Cambodia, with the enactment of the Law on Elections of Commune/Sangkat Councils and the Law on Administration and Management of Communes/Sangkats.

Decentralization means that certain rights, responsibilities and resources are transferred from the central level of government to the democratically elected Communes/Sangkats. Decentralization aims to promote democracy and to improve the living conditions of the population. Citizens have the opportunity to influence decisions on local matters and have the right to elect the members of the Commune/Sangkat Council.

In February 2002 the first commune council

elections were held in all 1,621 communes with 11,261 councilors elected. Depending on the size of the commune, between five and eleven members (including the commune chief, a first and a second deputy) are working on the council. Although the 1993 constitution guarantees equality between men and women and the government is mainstreaming gender across all major policy initiatives, only 8.5% (983) of these elected councilors are female. This shows that women are still under-represented in Cambodian politics.

However, tasks for Cambodian commune councilors are to interact in local communes affairs and to be agents of the central government. In terms of local commune affairs, female as well as male councilors have the duties to support the

development of the Commune/Sangkat and the well-being of its residents. The councils are close to the citizens and therefore in a good position to find out about their needs and interests in order to develop programs that improve the living standards of their people. The work and conditions on the council can be really challenging and councilors daily have to face new problems. Therefore some capacity buildings for councilors are already implemented.

Female Councilor Forums

In 2003/2004, the GTZ Administration Reform and Decentralization Project (AR-DP) located in Phnom Penh established in cooperation with The Asia Foundation (TAF) and the implementing organization Women for Prosperity (WfP) a Female

Councilor Forum pilot in seven of 24 Cambodian provinces: Battambang, Siem Reap, Kampong Thom, Kampong Cham, Pursat, Svay Rieng and Kandal¹.

The Forums aim to address specific challenges facing female commune councilors; enhancing their capacity to perform their roles and functions; increasing their political visibility; and providing a forum for experience-sharing and networking. From the outset, the Forums have been aimed at promoting ownership and sustainability, using the approaches of self-directed learning, self-learning and self-organization. These approaches were novel in the Cambodian context.

The concept involves four two-day sessions per year, with approximately 33 female councilor participants in each province.

The Forums involve self-directed learning through enabling participants to take the initiative in establishing their own Forum objectives and in identifying the particular problems and issues to be tackled during the Forums. The Forums involve self-learning, relying on female councilors to share experiences as the basis for joint problem-solving and development of their own strategies. Self-organization refers to participants taking responsibility for organizing the Forums (arranging venues and snacks, taking minutes, and gradually taking over facilitation) and logistics (such as travel arrangements and costs, and finding and funding their own accommodation).

The ultimate goal for the future is for participants to sustain the Forums on their own. This would involve participants facilitating and organizing the Forums independently with any necessary support in place.

Evaluation

After two years of implementation, GTZ- ARDP undertook an evaluation to assess the benefits and impact of the Female Councilor Forums. In particular, the evaluation



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Villagers during their interview in Kampong Thom Province

aimed to obtain information about the impact of the Female Councilor Forums on the capacity of female councilors and the preparedness of female councilors to stand again as candidates in the 2007 elections, the impact on the working and social environment of female councilors, including perceptions of commune and village level stakeholders of female councilor work performance, the perceptions of national, provincial and district stakeholders, and the capacity of the implementing organization in terms of capacity.

The main findings of the evaluation

have been that all interviewees appreciate the Forum concept and approaches. Moreover, the majority of female councilors (75%) report that the Forums have contributed to increased knowledge and capacity to perform their work. The majority of these female councilors reported that after attending the Forums they are valued more by their male colleagues and by their family members.

Difficulties

However, female councilors also reported continuing difficulties in problem-solving, particularly outside the Forums. In addition, there are only few examples of female councilor participants introducing their own initiatives on their councils.

At the national level the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the Ministry of Interior and also provincial stakeholders are interested in promoting the Forums and providing technical support, but lack a budget to provide financial support. Randomly interviewed villagers are not aware of commune council matters, and are not aware of either male or female councilors living in their village.

Impressions

Having the chance to work as an intern on this evaluation and being responsible for it was a special way to learn about the fascinating country, its culture and traditions, in a manner that is almost impossible for other people visiting Cambodia.

I can highly recommend anybody who is interested in development aid to take the opportunity to spend some months researching a country like Cambodia. It will definitely turn out to be an unforgettable adventure and experience!



Interpreter Thavriht Touch and Evaluator Maraile Gorgen during an interview with a village chief and villagers in Battambang Province.

Conclusion

The evaluation findings indicate that the Female Councilor Forums have benefited the female councilors and therefore should continue for more increased work performance and confidence. Even if female councilors still reported difficulties, the impact of the Forums is known at all levels and might motivate other women to stand for the upcoming 2007 Commune Council Elections.

The evaluation was made by GTZ ARDP

intern Maraile Görden and has spanned a period of five months. Interviews and focus group discussions were held at different levels in Phnom Penh and the provinces Battambang, Siem Reap and Kampong Thom.

Notes

¹ In 2005, the Forums are co-funded by GTZ-ARDP, Oxfam Great Britain, Novib, Forum Syd and TAF.

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Maraile Görden [Maraile.Goergen@stud.uni-goettingen.de] is a Geography Student (diploma) at the University of Göttingen and Member of the Association for Pacific Studies (APSA). In 2005, she spent six months in Cambodia, where she evaluated the Female Councilor Forums.