



INNOVATIVE: Journal Of Social Science Research

Volume 4 Nomor 4 Tahun 2024 Page 5642-5655

E-ISSN 2807-4238 and P-ISSN 2807-4246

Website: <https://j-innovative.org/index.php/Innovative>

Local Implementation of Decentralization Policies in Cambodia

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Abstrak

Kecenderungan Kamboja menuju desentralisasi sejak tahun 1990an hingga saat ini; setelah era Khmer Merah yang menghancurkan, pergolakan politik, kerusakan infrastruktur, dan kondisi ekonomi yang sulit membatasi upaya Kamboja untuk membangun kembali negara tersebut. Invasi Vietnam, Perjanjian Damai Paris, dan peristiwa politik lainnya dieksplorasi dalam artikel ini, beserta implikasinya terhadap sistem demokrasi Kamboja. Tujuan studi ini adalah untuk menilai efektivitas program desentralisasi daerah di Kamboja, dengan penekanan khusus pada perbaikan mekanisme pengambilan keputusan daerah dan administrasi publik. Studi ini memberikan analisis mendalam mengenai manfaat dan kelemahan desentralisasi di Kamboja kepada para pembuat kebijakan dan praktisi, atau individu biasa yang ingin meningkatkan tata kelola pemerintahan dan partisipasi masyarakat.

Kata Kunci: *Kamboja, Desentralisasi, Reformasi Demokrasi, Pemerintahan Lokal, Implementasi Kebijakan*

Abstract

Cambodia's tendency toward decentralization from the 1990s to the present; following the devastating Khmer Rouge era, political upheaval, damaged infrastructure, and difficult economic conditions restricted Cambodia's efforts to rebuild the country. The Vietnamese invasion, the Paris Peace Accord, and other political events are explored in the article, along with their implications for Cambodia's democratic system. The study's goal is to assess the efficacy of local decentralization programs in Cambodia, with a special emphasis on improving local decision-making mechanisms and public administration. This study provides policymakers and practitioners, or ordinary individuals looking to improve governance and community participation, with an insightful analysis of the benefits and drawbacks of decentralization in Cambodia.

Keywords: *Cambodia, Decentralization, Democratic Reforms, Local Governance, Policy Implementation*

INTRODUCTION

Cambodia has experienced rapid decentralization in recent decades, with the country transferring national government decision-making authority to local councils to enhance democratic administration and raise public awareness (Bhatti & McDonald, 2020). However, Cambodia was previously governed by a centralized administrative structure that limited local autonomy, leading to a greater degree of centralization and totalitarianism under the Khmer Rouge government of 1975–1979 (Atkinson, 2013). After a civil war and the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge regime, the country faced the challenge of reconstructing a state that was challenging due to various factors, including damage, destruction, government organizational ability, national culture, skilled labor availability, leaders' ideologies, political stability, and outside aid (Kumar, 1997; Brinkerhoff, 2005; Ear, 2007).

The post-conflict nation had an inexperienced administration with a range of political, administrative, and technical skills, making it difficult to find a single model for rebuilding and stability. The pace of rebuilding and stability can only occur at a rate determined by the degree of foreign help received and the nation's vulnerability (Raymond, 2020). In 1979, Vietnam launched an invasion of Cambodia, aiming to reinstate the communist state structure with a strong tendency toward totalitarianism (Lavoix, 2007; Atkinson, 2013). After the unsuccessful attempt, the Vietnamese forces left the country in 1989, and Cambodia faced the difficult task of rebuilding a destroyed nation (Croslow, 2008). Despite relative peace in some areas, the country remained plagued by poverty, infrastructure problems, and political instability (Gellman, 2010). The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 disrupted essential aid supplies, worsening Cambodia's socioeconomic problems (Slocomb, 2010).

The Cambodian-Vietnamese conflict ended in 1991 with the signing of the Paris Peace Accord, which provided substantial assistance and free elections under the United Nations Transitional Authority (UNTAC) (Chea, 2013). However, elections were held under UN supervision only until 1993, highlighting the need for improved local governance and democratic reforms (Moser-Puangsuwan, 1995). The power-sharing agreement between FUNCINPEC and the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) did not bring about political stability or long-term growth (Morgenbesser, 2017; Peou, 2020; Weiß, 2020). Opposition to decentralization kept the state centralized and slowed the development of efficient public administration (Chhy, 2014; Stuart-Fox, 2018).

Nevertheless, decentralization in Cambodia began in the late 1990s and continued to grow throughout the 2000s and beyond, with the government implemented the "Seila" program between 1996 and 2000, giving communes more financial resources and decision-making authority (Andersen, 2004; Hughes, 2007). Formal decentralization initiatives began with the 2000 Commune/Sangkat Election Laws and the 2001 Commune/Sangkat Administrative Management Laws, which established the basic duties and means of funding for communes and quarters (Nooi & Teik, 2011). The first commune council elections took place in February 2002, giving the people a chance to select their local representatives (Sen, 2012).

Continuing from earlier changes, the Strategic Framework for Decentralization and Deconcentration Reforms (D&D) was approved in 2005, aiming to gradually transfer power to higher administrative levels (Pak et al., 2005; Ly, 2016). Later legislation clarified the functions and obligations of local governments, focusing on topics such as infrastructure development, financial management, and service delivery. In 2008, the government reaffirmed its commitment to managing and directing decentralization initiatives with the creation of the National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development (NCDD) (Carrasco et al., 2023). There are still problems stemming from Cambodia's challenging past, even as the country attempts to move past the conflict. The study investigates the efficiency of local decentralization initiatives in Cambodia, focusing on the strengthening and improvement of the local government's decision-making process. It examines the challenges faced by these programs, providing insights for individuals and practitioners while also examining decentralization's impact on community involvement and service delivery. The study also evaluates the benefits and disadvantages of these initiatives, identifying best practices and insights for individuals and practitioners seeking to enhance public administration.

The Political Theory of Decentralization

Political decentralization is the transfer of power between national and local authorities, influenced by the party system structure (Amat et al., 2009). In Cambodia, the government has been implementing decentralization efforts since the late 1990s to improve local administration and service delivery. This progressive process promotes democratic governance and responsive management, marking a paradigm shift in the country's political structure (Kim, 2012; Atkinson, 2013; Men et al., 2024). The process involves the approval of new legislative agendas by national and local elites, granting authority and resources to all government institutions. This long-term change improves regional parties' understanding of national politics and influences the overall governance structure and decision-making processes (Kelly & Ashiagbor, 2011; Atkinson, 2013).

Political decentralization is essential for increased public engagement, efficient local public administration, and transparent government (Blunt & Turner, 2005; Dick-Sagoe, 2020). It aims to give people and their elected representatives greater autonomy over decision-making processes, emphasizing the importance of local participation in policy formulation and implementation (Fung, 2015). Accountability frameworks for citizens, service providers, local governments, and governmental agencies are crucial for political decentralization, ensuring efficient use of public resources and responsive policies to local needs and preferences (Faguet, 2011).

Administrative Structure and Governance in Local Government of Cambodia

Cambodia's administrative divisions are crucial for organizing and managing its regions, with the capital, Phnom Penh, serving as the administrative center (Spoann, 2019). The Constitution establishes borders between provinces and municipalities, with each province divided into communes (khum), districts (srok), and communities/villages (phum). In addition, municipalities are divided into sections (khan) and quarters (sangkat) (MLMUPC, 2016). The administrative unit system ensures efficient governance and service delivery at various levels (Pak et al., 2005).

These divisions also hold cultural and historical value, with many named after notable historical figures or landmarks (Chandler, 2008; O'Reilly, 2014). Article 146 of the Constitution mandates that provinces, districts, sections, communes, and quarters be governed according to organic law. Currently, subnational governments are governed by ministerial implementing regulations (prakas) and sub-decrees (anu-kret) issued by the Council of Ministers (Sperfeldt, 2017). Municipalities and provinces are administered by a sub-decree, with governors appointed by the prime minister at provincial and local levels (Chheat, 2013).

The governor oversees the administration of each province and municipality, with varying levels of responsibility and titles depending on the province's organizational needs and administrative demands (Eng, 2014).

Cambodia's Attempts at Decentralization: Strengthening Local Governance and Increasing Public Participation

Cambodia's decentralization initiatives aim to establish a legal framework for local governance, with the Law on Commune Administrative Management, establishing elected commune councils, and the Commune Election Law ensuring local representative selection, both passed in 2001 (MLMUPC, 2001). In 2005, Cambodia introduced the Strategic Framework for Deconcentration and Decentralization Reforms (D&D) to promote effective service delivery and local development (Ninh & Henke, 2005). The D&D reforms will focus on province and municipal levels, except for Phnom Penh. To support the administration's efforts, several provincial-level entities will be established, including a provincial/municipal council, governing board, secretary general, and cabinet (Pak et al., 2005; Sen, 2012; RGC, 2014; Eng, 2016). The administration's five-year mandate includes managing development initiatives in accordance with national policy and organic laws, monitoring infrastructure development, and delivering services (Reed, 2008).

The administration will receive transfers from the central government, a centralized budget, and a local human resource management system (Smoke & Morrison, 2008; Hughes, 2007). Financial management systems and procedures will be reformed to improve internal and external auditing, planning, budgeting, purchasing, managing state assets, accounting, and financial reporting (Tan, 2007). The council, elected mainly to represent local residents' interests, will have more authority and resources to carry out their operations within their particular networks (Carrasco et al., 2023; Men et al., 2024).

The Commune/Sangkat Administrative Management and Election Laws, along with the strategic framework for D&D, have facilitated the advancement of local government and community engagement in Cambodia. The enactment of laws governing administrative management at all levels and the monitoring and implementation of deconcentration and decentralization initiatives by the National Committee for Sub-national Democratic Development (NCDD) are evidence of the nation's commitment to the principles of decentralization, headed by the Minister of Interior (Ly, 2016).

The Commune/Sangkat Administrative Management and Election Laws, Decentralization and Deconcentration Reforms, and the National Strategic Development Plan 1994-2023 have facilitated local government and community engagement in Cambodia

(Nooi & Teik, 2011; Sen, 2012; Dick-Sagoe, 2020). The Rectangular Strategy, which began in 1998 and ended in 2024, was replaced by the Pentagonal Strategy, demonstrating the Royal Government of Cambodia's recognition of the need for advancing administration (RGC, 2014; RGC, 2019; RGC, 2023).

The Importance of Organizational Structure in Municipality Decentralization

The organizational structure of a municipality is crucial for decentralization and its implementation, as it unifies all stakeholders' activities and facilitates communication, cooperation, and plan execution (Amri, 2011). Partnerships across various sectors, including businesses, non-profits, community organizations, and government agencies, are essential for optimizing results, exchanging information, and harnessing resources (Krause et al., 2016; Kabeyi, 2019; Szemzo et al., 2022). Sociocultural variables, such as community dynamics and cultural norms, can influence the acceptability and effectiveness of decentralized government arrangements. The Cambodian Royal Government's decentralization and organic legislation aim to strengthen governance, empower local authorities, increase accountability, and improve public services quality (Pellini, 2007; Smoke and Morrison, 2008).

Community participation is essential for meeting regional needs and ensuring the efficacy of local projects. Priorities must be addressed when allocating resources, and each spending must have a legitimate justification (Ratner, 2011). The municipal assembly has approved the appointment of a strategy coordinator, who will coordinate the decentralization process, manage operations, report to the governor, and supervise the local development strategy's execution (Fox et al., 2002). Local officials must commit to the strategic planning process, contribute resources, and demonstrate dedication to strategy execution. Effective leadership is accountable for allocating resources, assigning tasks, and providing assistance for efficient program execution (Hughes, 2007).

Regular progress monitoring and evaluation aid in better decision-making, barrier identification, and frequent progress assessment. Successful implementation requires departmental representation, multi-sectoral implementation techniques, and well-defined roles and responsibilities (Ratner, 2011). Leaders in elected positions must consult with the administration and submit modernizing changes to the relevant political assembly (Meyer et al., 2012).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study explores the practical applications of decentralization characteristics in Cambodia's local policy implementation and identifies limitations. It employs a combination of theoretical and analytical approaches, focusing on decentralization theory, community development, public policy, and policy implementation. Primary information sources include written data, qualitative information, reports, memos, letters, published official documents, and constitutional documents. Secondary sources include books, reference materials, newspapers, journals, unpublished theses, and dissertations. The study also uses surveys and interviews with stakeholders, experts, and participant selection based on their positions and levels of decentralization engagement.

Data analysis involves systematically examining and interpreting non-numerical data to uncover patterns, themes, and meanings. Researchers immerse themselves in the data to identify recurring patterns, unique insights, and underlying meanings. The process begins with familiarization, followed by coding, which helps organize the data and identify commonalities, differences, and relationships. Themes are constructed through constant comparison, ensuring they accurately reflect the complexity and nuances present in the data. Qualitative data analysis often involves the use of qualitative analysis software tools to efficiently organize, code, and analyze large volumes of qualitative data.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Decentralization Outcomes

Decentralization, a concept that grants authority to local administrators, has been gaining attention for its potential impact on economic growth, public service delivery, and governance quality. This autonomy can encourage policy experimentation and competition, potentially leading to better outcomes (Andersen, 2004). However, concerns have been raised in certain contexts, like Cambodia, that local officials may lack the necessary capabilities to fully benefit from increased autonomy and resource access, potentially resulting in poor policy choices and inefficient resource utilization (Pellini, 2007)

Decentralization attempts in Cambodia have raised concerns about their potential influence on the economy, despite the country's good economic success following post-conflict peacebuilding efforts. The problem grows increasingly prevalent at the subnational level (Eng, 2014). Decentralization has aided resource-rich regions in expanding faster than those with limited resources by allowing a greater share of locally generated resource revenue to stay within the district (Meyer-Stamer & Hindson, 2007). It has also improved the local business climate by reducing red tape, simplifying administrative procedures,

promoting entrepreneurship, and cutting administrative barriers (Smoke & Morrison, 2008). Although the central government continues to provide the majority of financing for local income generation, decentralization programs have raised revenue through property taxes, business licenses, and service fees (Pak, 2011). Even with little support, these measures have helped some local governments become more financially self-sufficient.

Research on how Cambodian decentralization policies impact province-level public service delivery has drawn attention to the possible effects of decentralization for local communities. Decentralization has improved the perception of public goods and services in areas such as administration, healthcare, and education (Niazi, 2011). The responsiveness of public service delivery is improved by developing community relationships, allowing local governments to better satisfy the demands of the people they serve. This has led to more effective and individualized responses to local challenges, fostering community participation in regional development programs, with improved accountability by moving decision-making closer to the people. However, implementation varies by locality, with elected councils enhancing government institutions but still facing capacity building issues. While it offers opportunities for greater public involvement in local decision-making, participation varies between communities (Dick-Sagoie, 2020).

On the political front, decentralization has led to some power sharing between national and local administrations, with local elections being seen as an essential component of constitutional principles (Eng & Ear, 2016). Local political elites have emerged due to decentralization, reflecting the people's desire for a more accountable and participatory form of government (Kim, 2012; Marks & Naraharisetti, 2013). However, the ruling party's dominance presents challenges, and decentralization has not significantly extended the total political landscape, leaving little opportunity for opposition parties to function successfully (Un, 2005).

Nevertheless, research shows a decrease in corruption and excessive administration expenditure, indicating improved governance procedures. This is due to improved financial supervision and increased political accountability (Chhy, 2014; Norman, 2014). Initiatives to reduce favoritism in civil service jobs have led to more open district-level election procedures (Verkoren, 2005). Decentralization has also led to a reduction in deforestation and criminal activities. Studies show a positive trend towards sustainable resource management, with incentives from local politicians and administrators reducing deforestation rates (Sithirith et al., 2005).

Challenges and Barriers to Effective Decentralization

Cambodia's decentralization of planning and development management responsibilities has been a topic of interest since the 1993 elections. However, the country has faced challenges since then, including civil society fragmentation due to a gradual increase back to centralization of authority, less citizen engagement in politics, and a lack of trust between the government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Ninh & Henke, 2005). Community councils, appointed by the main political party, often report to their party rather than their voters, affecting accountability at the provincial or municipal level (Eng & Ear, 2016). This lack of trust undermines civil society's ability to promote fair development at both national and local levels (Springman et al., 2022).

There is also a lack of coordination and cooperation from non-governmental organizations, affecting accountability at the provincial or municipal level (Springman et al., 2022). This results in little engagement between the local population and their representatives, particularly commune or sangkat councils. The lack of well-defined roles, responsibilities, and resources among stakeholders, combined with inadequate management and control systems, results in overlapping development initiatives, unclear budgeting and execution procedures, and low support for elected commune/sangkat councils (Eng, 2014). Governors have little control over most development-related concerns, except for security and social order (Blunt & Turner, 2005).

Financial decentralization holds the potential to boost economic growth by empowering local governments, but its impact has been somewhat limited due to several driving factors (Morgan & Trinh, 2017). Alongside Cambodia's economic growth, there has been a concurrent rise in income inequality and environmental challenges (Qamruzzaman, 2024). Limitations in factor mobility and institutional quality may make it difficult for poorer districts to compete with wealthy ones, worsening inter-regional inequality (WBG, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Cambodia's administrative system has evolved from centralized to decentralized in order to promote local autonomy and democratic governance. This began with the Khmer Rouge dictatorship's consolidation of power. Decentralization was crucial for strengthening local administrations and facilitating grassroots decision-making. Initiatives such as the "Seila" and Commune/Sangkat Election Laws enabled local government elections. The Strategic Framework for Decentralization and Deconcentration Reforms (D&D) has accelerated the process. The National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development (NCDD) was established in 2008 to supervise and implement

decentralization initiatives. Despite improvements, sustainable development, local governance, and decision-making procedures require more strengthening.

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