

# **Grassroots Civil Society in Cambodia**

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**A discussion paper prepared for a workshop organized by  
Forum Syd and Diakonia in September 1998.**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The paper reports on a research project concerning actors and activities in grassroots civil society in Cambodia that was aimed to contribute to a discussion of indigenous democratic processes and resources.

After a discussion of the concept of civil society, a contrast is drawn between two paradigms in development and governance issues at the grassroots. One is a State centered bureaucratic approach. The other is a Wat centered self-help approach. The contrast of these paradigms highlights the issue of the objectives and effectiveness of external assistance in the Cambodian context and might provide lessons for programs contemplated in the areas of democracy and good governance.

A detailed discussion of Wat centered organization and activities based in civil society follows. The discussion highlights the roles and expectations for leaders in the Wat and parish, the appeals leaders make to generate internal resources and the public governance functions that these actors serve. A distinctive web of checks and balances is described within which the Wat Committee operates both in regard to decision making and financial management.

The importance of humility and a reputation for moral integrity in effective leadership is described. The significance of transitory, situational authority at the grassroots (the mekhyal, • gleader of the wind • h) is examined. The cultural value of participation in a moral community is shown to be the basis for grassroots civil society in Cambodia. The legitimacy of impermanent, task specific leaders and the ever-changing network of people forming a Wat-centered parish in rural Cambodian civil society contrast sharply with the notion of office-holding in a hierarchy of distinct territorial jurisdictions that comprise the state.

A number of questions are raised for discussion concerning the relations between the state and the Wat in the present context in Cambodia and concerning the consequences of the tension between them on the evolution of issues related to democracy building.

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

### **1. Scope and Focus of the Study**

This study originated in an expression of interest by Forum Syd and Diakonia in learning more about the indigenous social practices in Cambodia that might be significant to Forum Syd and Diakonia in implementing their mandates to strengthen democracy. More specifically, Forum Syd Diakonia wished to gain an understanding of formal and informal activities in rural Cambodia that might reflect strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats related to democracy-building issues.

Forum Syd and Diakonia wanted to raise the question about where Cambodian democracy might be going in the next ten to twenty years<sup>1</sup>. The aim of the donors was to consider how working with democracy issues in Cambodia could be made more relevant to actualities. The donors hoped to stimulate a discussion about what approach to democracy building might best promote participation and empowerment at the grassroots. The questions Forum Syd and Diakonia wanted to consider were what might be the consequences of democracy building efforts, both positive and negative, and what might be the prospects, opportunities and threats involved for democracy building efforts in civil society, in its relation to the state, in the present Cambodian context.

### **2. Methodology**

The Center for Advanced Study researchers have an ongoing interest in the study of village level society, cultures and political process. CAS proposed a study of grassroots civil society actors that might serve the donor • fs interest and complement other CAS studies on village conflict resolution, local pagoda governance structures, ethnic minority issues in Cambodia, studies of rural small business culture and studies of exploitation of vulnerable rural women.

A CAS team of researchers with a special interest in ethnography was assembled for this project. The participants include the author, Mr. Kim Sedara, Mr. Sotheavin, Ms. Ouch Kankiria Pheakadey, Ms. Hour Amara, and Ms. Heng Chhun Oeurn. The three young women who participated as junior researchers in this team are students in the Faculty of Archeology of the Royal University of Fine Art and show great promise as future anthropologists. Mr. Kim Sedara and Mr. Sotheavin are graduates from RUFA with considerable experience in social research with CAS. Mr. Kim Sedara has recently won a Fulbright Award to undertake graduate studies in anthropology in America.

The research team conducted unstructured interviews with knowledgeable, often elderly, informants who were considered influential in their communities, but who were usually not connected to state duties. In the villages of Siem Reap and Battambang provinces, where the research was concentrated, an effort was made to obtain interviews with male and female informants, members of the Buddhist monkhood, nuns and laity, and

prominent members of many local non-governmental organizations operating in the village.<sup>2</sup>

### **3. Relevance**

The purpose of this report on the research was to provide a point of departure for a discussion about the current state of democracy in Cambodia, just after the July 1998 elections. This report was initially prepared for a workshop to which a group of human rights and development NGOs and donor agencies were invited by Forum Syd and Diakonia. The intention of the study was to stimulate dialogue and exchange of ideas and experiences to improve cooperation among NGOs involved in democracy building. Accordingly, the conclusion of the paper was designed as a list of questions that were raised by the finding of the research and that were relevant to the discussion aims and intentions of the donors. The workshop on the paper produced a lively discussion of terms and distinctions appropriate for the field covered in the study and suggestions about future directions for democracy building efforts.<sup>3</sup>

The insightful and constructive criticism of Joel Charny, the observations of Sonny Östberg and Sue Davén and the notes on the workshop discussion by Ms. Malin Ericsson were particularly helpful to me in preparing a revised draft of the paper after the workshop.

### **4. Limitations of the Study**

Given the limitations of budget and time, the research team could only conduct intensive study among a small number of informants in a few communities in the Northwest of Cambodia.<sup>4</sup> Our technique of identifying key categories in the Khmer language to guide the research and analysis has the promise of uncovering general attitudes in Cambodian society. But it must be acknowledged that further more extensive research is needed to verify how widespread in Cambodia the civil society characteristics identified in this paper actually are.

In view of the aim of this paper to contribute to an understanding of the present situation for democracy building efforts, we thought it might be worthwhile to introduce our research with two preliminary but limited discussions. First, we consider the basic definitions that guided our study. The term •civil society• has become a buzz- word lately with many different meanings. We begin by explaining our use of the term for the purposes of this study. It was beyond our scope to promote one or another view.

Regarding the proper relation of civil society to the state. That should be a determination for Cambodians to make in their own country. Second, since democracy building efforts would seem to involve strategic donor interventions in Cambodian society, we thought it might prove useful to consider some development approaches in Cambodia that have significant implications for democracy and civil society. These development approaches may provide lessons and suggestions for the specific democracy strengthening interventions Forum Syd and Diakonia and other donors contemplate. It was not our aim to assess these development paradigms from the point of view of the effectiveness of their impact on village economic conditions, nor to decide which, if any, intervention might be most appropriate for democracy building in the current Cambodian context.

## II. Civil Society

### 1. Definitions and Distinctions

The key concepts for this discussion are •ggrassroots•h and •gcivil society•h. The first term is fairly straightforward. We take the term literally; our focus is on the rural countryside where Cambodian farmers, comprising 85% of the population of the Kingdom, live in peasant communities. Our field visits were made to villages to identify the significant actors and activities of civil society.

•gCivil society•h is a theoretical construct that has been debated European political discourse for the last 200 years.<sup>5</sup> The •gcivil•h aspect of society in focus here has to do with the quality of civility or civilized behavior in the public sphere. This feature of society brings to mind Schopenhauer•fs parable of the porcupines on a cold winter night. The right distance apart to stay warm and not get stuck by one another is maintained by what he calls courtesy, the rules of politeness or civility in society.

There are three main issues in the debate than can be mentioned as an orientation to our study of civil society in Cambodia.

The first issue has to do with a distinction between modern and traditional societies. The concept of •gcivil society•h, as thinkers in the Scottish Enlightenment formulated it, meant to draw attention to a feature of modern society. This large-scale society involved interactions among relative strangers who could routinely deal with one another with a degree of confidence and safety. The interactions required a certain •gcivility•h or an expectation of the predictability in dealings with people with whom one was not well acquainted. Krygier notes that Adam Smith spoke of •gcommercial•h or •gcivilized•h society to emphasize the plural, commercial interactions, advanced division of labor, and wide-scale interdependence of the modern world. Hegel took this meaning into German, and Marx took it from him.

•gCivil society•h, in this formulation, was meant to contrast with the narrow primordial bonds of family and kinship, clan and tribe, which were considered characteristic of primitive, or traditional, small scale, rural societies. Within these traditional societies, exclusive, particularistic relationships predominated and a predatory attitude was often taken toward •gothers•h.

The second issue in the formulation of the concept of •gcivil society•h is that it is distinct from the state. In modern society, independent actors imbued with a degree of civility are able to choose to participate and associate with others in cooperative ventures. This cooperation gives rise to organizations and institutions in the public realm that are not connected to the state. Krygier points out that Hegel in Germany and Thomas Paine in England and America stressed the importance of the distinction between the unifying and centralizing tendencies of the political rule of the •gstate•h on one hand, and the pluralistic, freely chosen associations of a quite separate •gcivil society•h, on the other hand.

An important aspect of this distinction between state and civil society, as Krygier indicates, was famously discussed by Montesquieu. He argued that independent social bodies, which were acknowledged in law, served to moderate the tendencies of government toward despotism. These •gintermediary•h social groupings of •gcivil society•h like the Church, that possess or gain a standing of legitimacy in society, have the ability to restrain and check the power of the centralized state. As such intermediate

civil society groupings defend their legal standing and autonomy, they advance a dialogue between rulers and society and between social groupings of civil society. This dialogue contributes to the development of a rule of law, within which the tendencies to despotism can be confronted.

The third important issue in the contemporary debate about civil society has to do with the nature of the relationship between civil society and the state. According to Krygier, some modern writers, like dissidents in communist regimes, observe that totalitarian regimes attempt to eliminate an independent civil society. Under these conditions, civil society is not only distinct from the state but is a vehicle for struggle against the despotism of the state. Other writers can point to more advanced societies, like those of Scandinavia for example, where civil society is acknowledged as historically separate from the state. But in these societies the partnership between civil society and state is now so close that, far from being locked in struggle with one another, they fundamentally depend on one another.

In the Cambodian context, the evolution of a large-scale society with manifold internal and external networks of exchange and communications can be traced to the origins of Angkor as one of the ancient Indianized states of Southeast Asia (the title of a classic work on Southeast Asian history by Georges Coedès). In the post-Angkorean era, probably the most significant process in the development of Cambodian civil society has been the conversion of the mass of the Khmers to Theravada Buddhism. This world religion, in a rich syncretism with localized animist beliefs and practices, provided the elements of a broadly accepted, civil, that was inclusive, tolerant, pluralistic, rule centered, and rational. Part of the mass appeal of Theravada Buddhism was probably that it provided a local and social center for an egalitarian congregation. The new ideology was based in a universal idiom that was independent of the Brahmanist Mahayana Buddhist royal cult and aristocratic hierarchy which, since the Angkorean apogee, was in a process of prolonged decline. Popular Cambodian Buddhism thus seems to bear the hallmarks of a remarkably modern tendency in providing a context for civil society by contrast; the traditional and contemporary Cambodian elites and their dependents, often led by princes, pretenders, usurpers or warlords, seem to be organized by primordial bonds of family or by particularistic, hierarchical links of patron and client. These elites typically seem to be driven by narrow and predatory ambitions for power, privilege and wealth and, in terms of the arguments about civil society discussed above, seem to represent a backward or traditional tendency in Cambodian society.

As is well known, the communist regimes in Cambodia made every effort to abolish non-state organizations and attachments. The Khmer Rouge tried to remove any intermediary bodies between the individual and the state. The PRK endeavored to create state-sponsored organizations, associations and groups to fill the void left by the Khmer Rouge but also to serve as a substitute for an independent civil society.

As the wounds inflicted by thirty years of warfare, revolution, civil strife continue to heal, the Cambodian peasantry will attempt to recreate their civil society groupings at the grassroots. It is only in the last few years, since the Paris Peace Accords, that state suppression of Buddhism has begun to relax. Now, young men are permitted to enter the monk hood, assuring the sustainability of Wats as civil society institutions. Meanwhile, the rebuilding of damaged and neglected Wats, and the construction of new religious structures all over the country attests to the place of Buddhism in the sentiments of the Cambodian people, especially in the rural countryside. The endogenous voluntary

cooperative associations connected to the Wat may also play a significant part in this resurgence of civil society.

The aid interventions of International Organizations and Non-Government Organizations in areas of community development, rural development, public administration, good governance, human rights, voter education and so on, will also undoubtedly have a far reaching impact on the evolution of social institutions in Cambodia.

## **2. Civil Society Groups**

Another perspective on civil society, discussed by Leslie Fox, emphasizes the relations among citizen groups in a cultural or political context. To consider this aspect of the notion, it may be useful to picture an area of social space between the State and the Family. In this space people come together to form associations or activity groups that comprise the intermediary bodies of civil society. Fox identifies several features that characterize these associations:

### **1. Values.**

These groups in civil society typically share civic or community value, especially a sense of mutual trust, reciprocity and tolerance among the members included in the group. These values give rise to an impulse toward group activity that benefits the community. The group activities associated with agriculture, like dam or reservoir building or canal maintenance, which serve community economic interests, might be an instance in which the value prevailing in the community were expressed in the civil society activity of the villagers.

### **2. Discourse**

Associations typically share a discourse or a web of public communication that serves as a vehicle for promoting and sharing the norms and values held by the group. This discourse includes structured vocabulary, proverbial wisdom, moral injunctions, and customary formulations, traditional maxims that can be used by the public to reinforce their solidarity and to call to account the groups members who stray too far from accepted values. In Cambodia, both the super naturalist cults of ancestors and spirits and Buddhism provide an important discourse that aids the formation and preservation of associations in civil society. To speak Khmer means being able to use language appropriate to the social differences between the speakers. A shared understanding of the deference accorded to age, or to clergy, or to rank would be an example of the way discourse is used to structure activity groups in Cambodian civil society.

### **3. Expectations**

Civil society groups seem to emerge from a universal human tendency to form groups to accomplish tasks and to reach objectives that are beyond the capability of an individual. From one society to another, quite different common purposes may typically generate the formation of these groups. In a highland society, for example, vendetta revenge killings or bride abductions or headhunting between groups may be taken for granted as primary occasions for civic action. In a neighboring lowland society, repair of embankments, rice terrace, roads and bridges might be the expected and familiar basis for group formation and civil society action.

#### 4. Autonomy

Another important aspect of civil society is that it is more or less independent of the state. Civil society groups and actions often seem to grow from extremely localized concerns. At the same time, civil society associations generally aim to preserve their particular solutions to local problems and to resist the large-scale integration and standardization of social life promoted by the state. Some degree of tension between the state and civil society is central to their relationship, depending on the local historical circumstances. In contemporary Cambodia, as anywhere, there might well be a diversity of opinion about what the proper stance of civil society toward the state should be. But Cambodia's unique history of the violent attempt by the Khmer Rouge to obliterate civil society probably sharpens this debate about the autonomy of a resurgent civil society.

#### 5. Organization

While groups in civil society are much less formal and less structured than state organizations, there are typically coherent traditional organization features that can be discerned in these groups. People with certain customary attributes and attitudes are typically recognized as leaders of these civil society associations. Appeals that strike certain cultural tones are typically utilized to form a group and organize action. Characteristic means for mobilizing resources to accomplish group goals are typically employed.

## **2. Other Distinct Social Institution**

To get a clearer picture of the space this civil society occupies, it might be well to mention some other important social institution that are usually considered to be distinct from civil society.

The market economy, that sector of social life where the exchange of goods and services takes place, can usefully be distinguished from the civil society that is under examination here. Civil society can be thought of as a dimension of social-political life between the State and Market, and distinct from both.

Political parties and the electoral process are fundamental institutions in democratic societies, but can also be seen as distinct from civil society. Political parties aim to contest with one another to obtain state power. In contrast, civil society is that public realm outside the state from which groups and associations may voice demands for accountability and reforms in the state, with no intention of replacing the state themselves. The human rights NGOs in Cambodia are examples of civil society actors performing this kind of demand function.

Civil society may also include groups and associations that supply public governance functions at a local level in society, by enforcing customary rules, maintaining traditional standards of morality and by facilitating participation in action for the public good. Civil society actors that perform this supply function will be focus of the present paper.

For the purposes of this study, our focus during fieldwork was on local, self-governing associations in village Cambodian society that have traditionally operated out of the control of the state, in the arena of civil society at the grassroots. Our aim was to identify the actors and associations in civil society that undertook civic action or public governance functions from a standpoint outside the state structures. One purpose of such

a focus is to consider the lessons that can be learned from Cambodian customs and practices that might be relevant to democracy building in the larger society.

Another purpose of this focus on endogenous civil society at the grassroots is to raise the question of where and how external support in this civil society realm might promote democratic governance at the grassroots, or undermine it.

With these definition clarified, we can now turn to a brief look at two well-known development strategies that were designed explicitly to deal with issues of civil society. There may be lessons to learn from a comparison and contrast of these strategies that can serve democracy-strengthening efforts. This discussion of two development models will enable us to move from the abstract discussion of civil society to our specific fieldwork findings.

### **III. TWO DEVELOPMENT MODELS**

The two different development strategies described below are no doubt familiar to everyone in the NGO community in Cambodia. This discussion is not intended to provide a comprehensive picture of the two development programs. My intention is to use these examples to highlight the boundary between state and civil society and to indicate alternative solutions that have been presented to the problem of the proper relationship between these two spheres.

I assume that readers will agree that rural development issues and local governance issues are inextricably woven together at the grassroots. In a countryside that is overwhelmingly devoted to agriculture, the kinds of public activities peasants undertake will typically be related to their primary occupation, which is farming and petty trade. Accordingly, interventions that are sensitive to issues of • g participation; • h which are directed at economic development in rural areas, will likely also have intended or inadvertent effects on civil society. By contrasting two well known and well documented intervention strategies, the UNDP- CAREERE-Seila approach and the GTZ Self-help approach, we may be able to view our village case-study material with greater clarity.

#### **1 The Decentralized Approach of-UNDP-CAREERE-Seila**

The Seila approach to development is described as a • gcontrolled policy experiment • h that features the concept of • gdecentralization • h In the context of the history of centralized authority in Cambodia; • gdecentralization • h means shifting the center of gravity of the program from the capital to the province. Nevertheless of the Seila approach is to strengthen the public administration of the state as regards development.

From the point of view of Phnom Penh, • gdecentralization • h may be a significant change in development management, planning and financing. But from the point of view of the grassroots, which is the concern in this paper, the concept of • gdecentralization • h may be a remote abstraction. From the peasant point of view, whether authorities wielding power are based in Phnom Penh, or the Provincial capital, or the district, or the commune or the village, these authorities all operate within the same category, roat amnaac , the state.

Another important feature of the controlled policy experiment is to rationalize • glevels of responsibility • h of local administration and to create effective • gplanning and

financial systems within a new management structure that was established by Royal Decree. A new hierarchical structure from the highest levels of government down to the village was created. CARD (The Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development), STF (The Seila Task Force), PRDC (The Provincial Rural Development Committee), DDC (The District Development Committee), CDC (The commune Development committee), VDC (The Village Development Committee). And each of these committees has its terms of reference clearly defining the respective roles and responsibilities of each level in the planning and management of change

In sociological terms we recognize this policy experiment as an attempt to move away from traditional patterns of authority and particularistic loyalties and connections towards a legal-rational pattern for authority and a bureaucratic model for relationships typical of complex Western organizations. In political terms; the experiment is aimed at devolution of power to decentralized local development actors.

Although the Seila experiment is being conducted initially in five provincial, the objective is to provide a decentralized bureaucratic model and a system of capacity building that can be applied through the state.

The Seila programme will concentrate on developing the provincial systems and structures required and clarify the roles and responsibilities of the local government structure. Once this clarification has been achieved considerable emphasis will be placed on building the capacity of local government institution through a targeted approach which will focus specific attention on those government officials and civil servants who have the most critical tasks in managing the Seila programme. The capacity building objective of the programme in the area of governance is described as follows:

- to raise awareness and provide training in good governance principles and practices for province, district, commune and village officials and committees in order to support the regeneration of a strong civil society in partnership with government.

The character of the partnership contemplated between civil society and the state at the grassroots is the aspect of the experiment that is most significant for the purposes of our study.

The expression of the Seila experiment at the grassroots level is the VDC (Village Development Committee). Within the new management structure,

The village Development Committee is mandated to represent the village to government, to other civil associations and local agencies as well as to international agencies in planning and managing their own process of village development.

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The VDC is created to be an elected body that is recognized by the Royal Government and by the Seila management structure in the province as,

• can autonomous committee which will work to ensure coordination and communication between the Royal Government and civil society for development purposes.

The Seila design seems to envision the VDC as being located on the border of the state and civil society in the rural areas of Cambodia. Evidently it is expected that from such a strategic position, the VDC will be able to facilitate effective interaction between these two disparate realms. Given the enormous influence of the Seila model, it would be extremely important to study how VDCs in the five Seila provinces manage to function at

this borderline, with, special attention to the effect of the VDC on civic action and public governance at the grassroots. such a study was obviously well beyond the scope of our research.

From the documentation we have, however, we may at least be able to get a sense of the kinds of concerns that lay behind the VDC design . We note that the Seila programme aims to assure

- that population at village level traditionally excluded from decision-making be brought into the planning dialogue • c

This seems to suggest that village civil society is to be brought into tighter dialogue with the state through the higher levels of the Seila management structure in order to rectify a traditional pattern of exclusion of villagers from plans that affect them. But from what we know about the typical desire of civil society associations and actors to value their autonomy, one might guess that misunderstandings might arise between these Seila designed VDCs and other civic action and public governance activity at the grassroots that aims to maintain a wary distance from the state. This is a question that calls for a sensitive analysis of the relations of VDCs and other civil society actors that was beyond the scope of our present study.

We note that the Seila principles are intended to provide a framework of assessing the quality of the dialogue that generates level planning. One specific issue that is mentioned is

- the extent of participation of groups traditionally marginalized from village decision- making, especially women and poorer households • c

A second specific issue involved in assessing the improvement in the quality of the dialogue between the government and civil society reads • c

- the degree to which traditional power structures, including partisan political figures, influence the development of the plan.

A third specific issue relevant to assessing the success of the VDC will be,

- the extent to which the plan assists in the mobilization of internal as opposed to external resources.

These criteria apparently grow out of an assessment of the nature of civil society prevailing in Cambodian villages into which innovations based on the Seila principles will be introduced.

The first issue seems to suggest that, a traditional pattern of village decision- making must be rectified in grassroots civil society in accord with Seila principles. That would indicate that the VDC is intended to model alternatives to the indigenous

associations and groups in civil society in which some sectors of the rural population may be underrepresented in community decision-making.

The second issue draws attention to the pressures that can be expected from partisan political figures in the highly polarized post-UNTAC Cambodian state. In view of the proximity of the VDC to the state, at the boundary of state and civil society, it is not clear how the newly created VDC will resist the influence of the politics of the state. On the other hand, other associations and groups civil society have, from time immemorial, been inventing ways to defend their autonomy against the state.

The notion of traditional power structures with which the new VDCs may have to contend as they seek to occupy space in civil society, is probably the most important assumption about conditions in grassroots politics that this formulation makes. What is probably meant is the local authority structure put in place in 1979 by the PRK, which has dominated village and commune governance ever since. If so, the VDC would seem designed to moderate the power of the state apparatus at the grassroots level by broadening citizen participation in development planning within the Seila planning process. That local planning process is funded externally and, at least at the commune level and above, is led by state officials. The extent to which the VDC serves as an agent of the state or becomes a successful vehicle for civil society action (or whether there is a dichotomy here) can only be discovered by specific research on that topic, which is beyond our present scope.

The third issue relating to the mobilization of internal resources is crucial to the question of sustainability when the inevitable day comes that external aid dwindles. Cambodian villagers have a strong tradition for successful generation of local resources for their civil society activities. The best example of this, obviously, is the support provided for the village social, cultural and religious center, the Wat. The Wat and its mendicant monks are completely dependent on the regular contributions from local parishioners.

The self-help or internally supported activities and actors in Cambodian civil society, generally associated with the Wat, were the focus of the GTZ development experiment in Kampong Thom. A discussion of the GTZ approach will provide a contrast to the decentralized Seila approach and will lead into our research findings regarding Wat-centered grassroots civil society activity.

## 2. The GTZ-PDP Promotion of Self-Help Activities

GTZ had intended to make a long-term commitment to an experiment in development in the province of Kampong Thom. Unfortunately, the events of July 1997 brought about a slowdown in German funding which has curtailed the project.

Early in the formation of the project, in 1995, the GTZ Self-help team carried out an extensive examination of the indigenous grassroots organizations and associations in civil society of the target province. In their assessment of this data the GTZ Self-help team decided to become a partner to local Wat committees in order to carry out an aid program emphasizing self-reliance and in order to build capacity for indigenous development.

In 1996 the national tendency to form provincial structures resembling the Seila innovations also affected Kampong Thom. VDCs were created under a Provincial Development Program that worked closely with the Provincial government, with support from GTZ. The original GTZ Self-help team, still working with Wat committees and other local associations, became a component of the larger PDP program.

What is relevant for us in this German effort is their documentation of the extremely lively and diverse civil society activity that they found in the villages of Kampong Thom. There is no reason to think that this province is unique in its preservation of traditional Cambodian social and cultural organizations, associations and activities. And indeed, our own research in Siem Reap and Battambang confirms that the same internally supported civic activities found by GTZ can be found elsewhere in Cambodia. Contrary to the agonized lament so often heard in Phnom Penh, that Pol Pot's regime of three year eight months and twenty days had destroyed Cambodian culture, indigenous civil society is, in fact, alive and flourishing in the countryside.

The GTZ Self-help team identified three levels of grassroots organizations or self-help groups in their research. The first was the pagoda level, which could include a constituency of parishioners from several villages. The second was the village level and the third was a sub-village level comprised of several families. The self-help designation indicates that the groups traditionally relied on internal resources. The GTZ aim was to determine where they could introduce their external resources in order to extend the reach and effectiveness of these self-help groups.

At the Wat level, GTZ described the Wat committee and identified it as the most influential and significant grassroots organization, from the point of view of the range of civic actions it customarily organized. These activities centered on support for the Wat and for the monks and for the schools that are normally built on Wat grounds. But the Wat committee also organizes public works projects like tree planting, pond digging and road and bridge building in the vicinity of the Wat.

According to the GTZ research, the Wat committee is composed of achar and the influential people of the parish who, according to the GTZ finding, are

- normally trusted by the villagers, in that the villagers are willing to concede some of their properties to the pagoda. The people give donations willingly not only for pagoda repairs but also for the pagoda associations (cash, rice) because they can make merit and free themselves from sin

The Wat committee is completely dependent on the donations of the community and is expected to keep accurate and transparent accounts and to keep the community funds safely in the Wat. From this position of trust and influence, members of the Wat

committee also evidently take on other public governance functions like encouraging village reciprocal help, helping to reconcile village and domestic conflicts and advising villagers about hygiene, sanitation and the proper use of pesticides and fertilizer.

Yet another function mentioned for the members of the Wat committee is to maintain good contact with the local authorities and, now, even to international organizations. But this function clearly has very ancient roots.

In old times the Achaars presented the problems of people to the district and provincial governors and even to the King. Two other activities of the Wat committee that the GTZ material describes may have traditional roots, but clearly also have been influenced by current development initiatives. One is a •gcash association•h organized by achaars and abbot to provide credit to the poor and to finance Wat construction. The other is •gmerit rice association,•h which are rice banks located in the pagodas and which evidently were established in the 1980s. These associations seem to be modern forms by which traditional community support for the Wat centered activities can be mobilized for community benefit.

Other grassroots organizations at the Wat level •gboat racing groups•h that keep their naga boat at the Wat, where they provide it regular offerings and ablutions. These boats are brought by the parishioners to compete with boat from other Wats around the country at the annual boat races in Phnom Penh, in front of the Royal Palace. This is a kind of traditional religious and sporting activity, which is also well known in Laos and Thailand, that serves to build the solidarity of the parish. That solidarity, in turn, reinforces the influence of the Wat and committee as a center and facilitator of civic action in the various villages that constitute the parish.

At the village level, the GTZ research mentions a •gvillage celebration group•h organized by the chas tom (respected elders) just after the rice harvest. The elders seek contribution of paddy from the farmers to form a mound of golden grain in the village center. In the morning of the ceremony monks are invited to bless the harvest and pray for the next years planting season. In the afternoon and into the night traditional music is played so the young men and women, including those from neighboring villages, can dance together. This harvest festival is a familiar opportunity for the kind of flirting and courting that would probably not be appropriate at the Wat. The activity of such a group emphasizes the role of the chas tom, who can supervise a ritual of thanksgiving for present and future village prosperity. At the same time, the ceremony provides a culturally approved opportunity for inter-village solidarity to be enhanced by the marriage links that may be formed at the festive occasion.

Below the level of village, the GTZ research discovered many informal mutual- help groups that serve to knit the households of Cambodian rural society together. The traditions, customs, rules and expectations associated with these groups suggest that they are ancient elements of Cambodian civil life.

There are •gcow exchange groups•h by which an animal owner can have his animal tended by another person in exchange for the one of the animal's offspring. There are •gdraft animal exchange groups•h by which people lacking on the pair of animals needed for work in the fields, or lacking some other major agricultural implement, can work out an exchange with a neighbor. There are •glabor exchange groups•h by which reciprocal labor for farming or house building or firewood collecting can be organized. There are •gemergency help groups•h which form to deal with fire or mine explosions or theft in the village. There are •gpond digging group•h which form to dig a pond for common use.

There are •gcooking groups•h of women who are expert at preparing feasts and who work at festivals, funerals and Wat ceremonies in exchange for some of the food. There are also •gpots and dishes exchange groups•h by which contributions from villagers are used to buy the utensils needed for ceremonies and feasts. The elders in charge of this group lend the utensils to villagers in the group and assure that any or breakage is made good.

The GTZ team also noted a number of religious activities, associated either with Buddhism or animism, each of which may draw in a group of believers from various parts of the community. For instance, a group to wake up the spirits is often led by the Wat committee. The celebration involves the building of a mound of sand for the earth spirit. Food is provided for the monks, the spirits and is shared by the villagers as well. A villager who is known to be adept at entering trance to contact an area spirit organizes another such activity. This group joins with food and traditional music to witness the trance and to beg for forgiveness and seek a cure for any disease that may be afflicting the group members.

The reason the GTZ Self-help team conducted such ethnographic research was to ascertain how and where they could introduce their development aid into grassroots society with a maximum sensitivity to the indigenous culture. They examined the nature of leadership of these groups in local civil society and the principles by which members of the group joined in association. They indicated the values shared by the community members that enabled these groups to form. They also looked closely at the indigenous methods by which groups formed to accomplish tasks larger than could be contemplated by any individual or family. Of course this latter concern was key to their development mandate. As I noted above, the GTZ Self-help team concluded that the Wat committee would be the most appropriate partner in their assistance projects.

### 3. Two Development Approaches to Grassroots Civil Society

We saw that at the grassroots the UNDP-CARER-Seila approach aims to introduce the VDC, which is part of a new bureaucratic structure closely linked to the state, but which also aims to form a bridge to civil society through development activities. In contrast, the GTZ development approach focuses on the existing governance structure of the Buddhist Wat, an institution of Cambodian civil society par excellence, which is the Wat committee, drawn from members of the parish of the Wat.

The VDC was created to look mainly upward toward a hierarchy of committees and line ministry departments associated with the new management structure to obtain ministry departments associated with the new management structure to obtain development support. That support is presently available mainly from external, international donor sources. The Wat committees are traditional organizations that look outward to the parish on which they are completely dependent. It is only the voluntary contributions of the Wat congregation, gathered by the Wat committee, that enables the survival of the Wat, the monks and makes possible the public works activities centered on the Wat.

The UNDP-CARERE-Seila development approach can be seen as an attempt to decentralize the financing and management of development in the Cambodian government and to create the VDC as a legal-rational entity at the boundary of the state and civil society. The GTZ approach can be seen as an attempt to regenerate the moral influence of Buddhism in Cambodian society by strengthening the development capacity of the Wat committee, which is an institution situated at the boundary of the sacred and the secular realms in the community.

Another way to look at the contrast between the UNDP model and the GTZ model is to see how each understands the notion of sustainable development. For UNDP the key to sustainability is creating (or strengthening the capacity of) modern, western, bureaucratic institutions in Cambodia. This paradigm aims to reform and strengthen state apparatus, especially at the province level, and to create quasi-bureaucratic

planning partners at the grassroots that can link to the state and to development donors. If the Seila development committees follow the Weberian type for legal-rational institutions, we would expect a strong tendency towards secularization in this model.

For GTZ, the key to sustainability is to introduce improvements and efficiencies in preexisting traditional social groupings in civil society. This paradigm emphasizes the importance of the indigenous values, roles, beliefs, expectations and appeals that comprise the worldview of the target community. The thrust of this paradigm is to mobilize age-old wisdom and the practical techniques preserved in Cambodian village culture and religion, communities at the grassroots, who may have no formal connection to the state

A deeper study of the consequences of development for civil society and democracy building is called for in Cambodia. Every development initiative in Cambodia will probably find its own solution to the problem of where it fits in relation to state and civil society, as it pursues efforts to address problems of poverty, disease and illiteracy in rural Cambodia. These solutions are likely to depend on an assessment of the character of the state and the conditions of civil society institutions and the possibilities for democracy at a particular time and place. And, of course, an important factor will be the mandate or agenda or outlook of the agency that is undertaking the initiative.

More research is needed to help us understand the interplay of institutions of State and Religion in Cambodia and their effect on civil society actors and activities especially at the grassroots. This research would seem to be essential to determining a development course that can be sustained when donor support begins to fall away. It is also essential in order to assess how civil society can continue to play a part in demanding reform and accountability from the state and how it can continue to supply significant public governance services that remain out of the control of the state.

#### **IV. GRASSROOTS CIVIL SOCIETY**

In this part of the paper I want to report on the fieldwork the CAS team of researchers undertook in the spring of 1998 mainly in Siem Reap and Battambang. Our aim was to identify local civil society actors and to examine the patterns of traditional leadership and participation in civic action, in order to contribute to a discussion of democracy building in Cambodia. In addition, we wanted to test whether the public governance self-help organizations that had been identified by GTZ Kampong Thom could also be found in province where UNDP-CARERE-Seila worked.

It was beyond the scope of our research to examine the interaction between the new Seila created VDCs and older civil society organization and structures. Such a study, with a specific focus on issues related to leadership, participation, decision making and villagers satisfaction with the process of development planning in their communities could be extremely useful for future discussions of the advance of democratic processes at the grassroots in Cambodia. It is hoped that this paper will provide some of the on which such a future study could build

Our main aim is to discuss the Wat as a traditional center for the organization of community effort for common benefit. The distinctive structure of grassroots leadership based on moral-cultural qualities rather than on rank or office holding will be considered. We will consider the role of mekhyal. These are traditionally recognized

initiators of civil action whose leadership is situational and whose success depends on pragmatic criteria of results. Finally we will examine a number of very small village-based local NGOs that have modest external funding. Their structure and function and the appeals they make to mobilize internal resources are seen to be comparable to those of the Wat committee, but a short step removed from the Wat.

#### 1. Wat Centered Buddha Power

Our informants with high level of Buddhist learning made a distinction between *aanaacak* (government power) and *puttea • f cak* (Buddha power), as they tried to explain to us the position of the Wat with respect to village politics and social action. *Aanaacak*, according to the dictionary means • gkingdom, royal power, profane or civil power as opposed to sacred power. • h This civil authority, in general, from the highest official in the capital to the lowliest government representative in the village is commonly referred to as *roat amnaac* (government power, authority). *Putthea • fcak* , according to the dictionary, means • gpower of the Buddha, power of Buddhism to lead its followers to religious purity, • h

To translate this Cambodian distinction as equivalent to our distinction between sacred and profane power might be misleading. Such a translation might suggest a similar power were being exercised by two different kinds of agents, like the Pope and the King or Church and state in European history. I think the English that may come closer to capturing the Khmer distinction is the difference between political power and moral power. I think the difference our Khmer informants expressed was between an external force that tries to organize action and to enforce obedience to rules on one hand, an internal force that gives rise to conduct and promotes adherence to principles on the other hand

The Cambodian Wat is the center for *puttea cak* or moral power. Accordingly, the civic activity associated with the wat is going to have to be seen in terms of the standards and values and moral principles Buddhism aims to advance. The sanctions that Buddhism can invoke and the rewards it can offer are in another life or on a moral, in contrast to the orders and punishments and gains that political power can accomplish in this life, on a material plane. Cambodian villagers naturally live on both these planes or between these poles of influence on.

from the perspective to the Wat, which is the focus we emphasize in this study, the moral dimension of *puttea • fcak* is not only distinct from the political dimension of *aanaacak*, the Wat is often considered superior to the state in attending to the needs of the community. As one elderly *achaa*r in Siem Reap put it, capturing a sentiment we often heard in Wat-centered civil action circles:

Religious people, especially the monks, are always credible and trustworthy, because if you do not comply with the discipline you will go to hell in afterlife. I think people who are always dedicated to helping society are those who are involved with religion, and not the people in the government.

Achaar, Prasat Bakong, Siem Reap

There is a tension expressed here between religion and government that is acknowledged as fundamental in Cambodian villages. It is not simply that these are different spheres of life, but there is a perceived difference in the attitude each takes

toward its authority in the community, which gives rise to a certain antipathy between them.

A number of old chas tom explained the importance of a mature social outlook that was considered typical of community leaders based at the Wat in Cambodian.

younger people are concerned about rook si (gaining a livelihood) and have no

time for the Wat. To be a leader of the people in the village we at have to go to the Wat in order to know what people feel. If you go to help the Wat you have to cut your own work because the Wat has many things that need to be done and to work for the Wat gains no pay, so young people are not happy to work at the Wat.

chas tom, Banan, Battambang

The Wat provides an outlet for a volunteer spirit of retired and energetic villagers, who have the means to devote themselves to service to the Wat and to the public. The lay leaders of a Wat have a constituency that consists mainly of the pious men and women of the village who regularly come to the Wat to make their weekly devotions. The Wat is the province of the community • fs mature householders who are responsible for the celebrations and activities that make the Wat the center of village life. This may be the source of the impression that traditional Cambodian village leadership is in the hands of elders or notables.

Any discussion about democracy building at the grassroots is going to have to consider the impact of any contemplated intervention on the relationship between government and religion in Cambodian, the relationship between older and younger generations of villagers, and the relationship between more and less affluent members of the social and moral community centered on the Wat-in a time of rapid social change.

## 2. Wat Committee Organization

In looking at the Wat from the point of view of its civic activity, we must begin with the structure of relationships among a group of actors that includes the abbot, monks, the achaar who is chief the Wat committee, the Wat committee members, and the Wat representatives in the villages of the parish.

The abbot of a Wat is the eldest, most experienced and most educated monk. He is in charge of the discipline of the monks. He-presides over the Wat and is the main point of contact between the sacred space of the Wat and the secular world. His counterpart is the achaar who is head of the Wat committee. Achaar are former monks, generally highly skilled in Buddhist learning, but who have returned to the life of a layman. The achaar are often the teachers of young monks in the Wat. A number of achaar we met in this research had been monks until 1975 when the Khmer Rouge defrocked them. After 1979 these men resumed their service at the Wat, but as laymen.

Together the abbot and chief achaar are responsible for maintaining the Wat as a physical structure and as a social-religious institution. From the point of view of the physical needs of the Wat, their main task is to gather the resources needed for the Wat,

over and above the food that is provided to the monks daily by the people of the parish. One respected village elder put it this way:

The chief achaa and the abbot are like husband and wife; only if they get along well can the Wat flourish  
chas tom, Ek Phnom, Battambang

In this image, the Wat and parish are imagined as the children of the effective union of secular and sacred resources and capabilities, represented by the achaa and abbot.

The abbot is expected to be able to raise funds independently. One way he can do this is when he is called to officiate at some special ceremony in the community. The money he receives he usually gives to the nuns living at the Wat to buy the food needed to supplement what the monks obtain on their begging rounds. It is widely thought that the abbot of a Wat must be well known and active in order for the Wat to prosper. One point of view was expressed by an achaa who felt that the abbot of his own Wat was ineffectual.

For a Wat to be well developed, either the villagers around must be rich or moderately well off, or the abbot must be very skilled in religious magic and be able to make liaison to outsiders and become popular. If the abbot just stays in the Wat and has no intelligence to make contact with the rich or wealthy high officials, how can the Wat prosper?  
Achaa, Siem Reap

One of the most impressive Wats we visited in Siem Reap illustrates how effective an abbot can be if he succeeds in making these external connections. The Wat had built a Pali school and had initiated an English language program. It charged no tuition and offered a place for poor students to stay and eat in the Wat while they studied. The more advanced monks are the senior teachers and the upper level students instruct the lower level students. According to the abbot of this Wat,

We created this school by following the Buddhist principle to eliminate ignorance.

Educated people are a human resource that can push a country or development. If monks are ignorant, Buddhism will disappear. If the population of a country is ignorant, the country will disappear.

Everything in this Wat comes from the Khmer who are staying in the United States

When I need money to do something, I let them know and explain what we are going to do. Then they start to collect the money for us. I think the reason the Khmer in the US trust us is that they know the money is spent for the benefit of Khmer society.

Abbot, Siem Reap

The contributions of Khmer-Americans are being used for the rebuilding of Wats all over Cambodia. This attests to the importance of Buddhism to the Diaspora Khmer and to the

general capability of the Cambodian Wat organization to absorb and manage external resource.

The achar who is chief of the Wat committee is primarily responsible for raising funds for the Wat. Sometimes he is also skilled in building or in estimating construction needs and costs. The chief of the Wat Committee takes the lead in construction and repairs of the Wat. His fund raising activities in the Wat committee are mainly concentrated in the parish of the Wat, but there is also an expectation that achar, like the abbot, should have connections beyond the parish to generate the annual Kathin contribution that every Wat needs to remain functioning.

Ours is a poor Wat because all the villagers beneath the roof of the Wat are poor. Our achars do not have connections outside of the village to rich people who might stage a Kathina ceremony. So we depend on destiny.  
Chas tom, Prasat Bakong, Siem Reap

The Wat committee is usually five or seven people, two or three achars, who keep 8 sel (Buddhist moral precepts) and the rest chas tom (elders) who keep 5 sel. The abbot of the Wat generally selects people to this committee from among the most pious and respected elder people of the parish who are willing to devote themselves to the Wat without pay. The abbot submits his choice to the consensus of the parish.

The abbot chooses people and announces their names to the parish. If there is no disagreement the committee is accepted. The chief is an achar. He is given no allowance or salary and is devoted to helping the Wat.  
Achar, Ek Phom, Battambang

There seems to be a general parish committee, which includes the abbot and all the monks and nuns and achars and all the significant chas tom in the parish. This group determines what the Wat needs are. When a project is decided upon, a Wat committee is constituted to mobilize the necessary resources and oversee the execution of the plans, under the guidance and final authority of the abbot.

The Wat representatives in the villages of the parish are called chas toms, but a distinction is also made between prittiecaar (elder teacher) and chas tom (elder). The prittiecaar are educated people selected on account of their piety and their regular participation in Wat activities. They are evidently appointed in pairs, one from each village in the parish. Chas tom is a more general term for experienced and respected elder and does not necessarily connote the additional element of learning and literacy expected of a prittiecaar.

To be an achar or a prittiecaar is not a job that is sought. A person is identified by monks and people because of good mind for religion and for people.

Achar, Banan, Battambang

The prittiecaar are those whose interest is merit for future life, not enrichment, thus they are trustworthy. They are often women. Twelve villages [comprising this parish] contribute more than fifty people; four

persons from each village, plus two achaar, and seven committee members to maintain the Wat. Monk, Banan, Banan. Battambang

The size of this group of pious village men and women responsible for the Wat would seem to make it a powerful element in village, or parish civil society. We did not investigate the relation of this group to the commune or village, or to the commune or village based development activities supported by the Seila program, but that would be a natural line of inquiry to pursue in the future.

We learned that when the achaar and Wat committee need something they speak to the chas tom or write a not the prittiecaar in the villages to explain and discuss the need. Later an announcement is made by loudspeaker to inform the entire parish of the Wat • fs need for assistance.

The relationship between the clergy, the abbot and monk on one hand, and the lay people of the Wat committee, the achaar, prittiecaar and chas tom was described as like the relation between rice and soup I take that to mean that each side has its independent identity, on one hand a pure, uniform solid substance (the sangka) and on the other hand a diverse mixture in fluid (the laity). But together they form a complete union that can nurture and sustain the community they serve.

In another formulation, the abbot and monks are compared to the root of a tree. The achaar are compared to the trunk of the tree. And the prittiecaar are compared to the dense network of branches of the tree. To my mind, the completion of the image would picture the householders of the parish as all the leaves of the tree.

These images reflect the organic unity of religion and community that has been built in Cambodia over centuries. There is no wonder then that Buddhism has begun to reemerge as a powerful force in village life, after the recent dark period of communist rule.

It is significant that while abbot and monks and achaar are all male, chas tom and prittiecaar are often women. The women of Cambodian village households are usually the ones to offer food to the monks as they make their begging rounds, and women householders are also the most observant of weekly holy day devotions in their Wat. Some of these pious women with education and strong personalities seem to be equivalent to achaar in their influence in Wat committee deliberations. It does seem that the gender division of labor in the religious sphere bears close, culture sensitive, scrutiny before a hasty conclusion is drawn that Cambodian Buddhism is dominated by men .

#### a. Wat Committee Finances

The Wat committee collects voluntary contributions from the villagers in the communities surrounding the Wat. Within the Wat committee there is great concern that the money be managed in an honest and transparent fashion. One of the members of the committee is the treasurer or accountant. He or she keeps the records of contributions and expenditures. But there is always a public knowledge of the finances and a shift of the funds into a hallowed state, once they are placed in the Wat.

As we collect the money we give in to the abbot, then he give is back to the committee Thus he gives the money a blessing and he knows how much money we have

chas tom, treasure of a Wat committee, Ek Phnom, Battambang

The money is usually kept in a strong box in the room of the abbot. The abbot is aware of when money is taken, and monitors the conduct of the committee, exerting a general moral influence over the funds and expenditures, although he does not keep any detailed accounts himself. The treasurer keeps the books.

In one Wat we visited a thief had taken the Kathina donation funds that had been collected and saved from the year before and which had been stored in the abbot's quarters. Now, we were informed, any Wat funds are shifted from place to place in a secret manner known only to the committee members

For the pragmatic Cambodian peasant mind, the real test of whether trust had been rightly placed, or not, is some concrete proof that the contributions collected from villagers are employed, effectively by the Wat committee for community purpose rather than for personal purposes. The older people, who were our informants at the Wat, generally held that mature villagers were likely to be trustworthier with money than young householders.

Old persons are trusted; the young are like soup without seasoning. Old people who know how to keep books are not suspected of using the money for their own purposes.

In order to get people to trust you with their money, you have to get something done

with is so they can see it with their own eyes, even though you spend some of the money to eat something. For example, when you go to the market to buy something [on behalf of the Wat] you can use some of the money to eat there. But you cannot bring the food back home, as that would be considered sinful.

chas tom, Siem Reap, Siem Reap.

One practical check on the use of Wat contributions for personal purposes is the obligation of Wat committee members to accomplish the objectives set by the Wat committee and to create results that will be visible to all. This sense of accountability is based in the powerful value at the grassroots that community esteem accrues to any person who can serve the Wat and the parish with exemplary honesty and visible self-sacrifice. Taking the leadership in providing durable improvements to the Wat is the time-honored way for a mature villager to advance his or her reputation and good name in society.

The abbot, monks, and Wat committee members choose the treasurer of the Wat committee. The treasurer is someone known to be both trustworthy and technically skilled in working with figures and calculation. An elderly achar in Siem Reap explained that he had been made treasurer on a school building project because they know I am not going to spend the money on myself. This is the sort of knowledge people have of one another's character in the face-to-face setting of grassroots civil society.

One chas tom in Battambang, who is currently also a member of the VDC in his community and a specialist in improving rice production, had been the treasurer of a Wat committee during a period when a school building project was initiated.

Before we built the school the abbot said to me • eYou will have to spend all your time for the Wat looking after the money as treasurer. We can raise enough money for the school. • f I said that I did not want to be keep the money with me, but that the abbot should keep it at the Wat. I did not want to be charged as a corrupt person for holding the money.

I am skilled at keeping accounts but I am not a cieng (artisan). When the builders amount of money they need fir some work, we have to go and look to see if it is appropriate or not.  
chas tom, Banan, Battambang

A strong concern to maintain an honorable reputation in connection with public funds in the care of the Wat committee and to avoid any suggestion of scandal or misuse of these funds was a theme in nearly all our interviews. This could be because of an expectation among villagers that when money falls into a person • fs hands, a temptation will be presented to use the money for personal purposes, which will be hard to resist. In this way every Wat committee activity is a public test of the integrity of the committee members. But we also learned that there is a well-established set of checks and balances built into the Wat-centered organization to assure the proper care of the finances.

In an example from Battambang, we learned that when the abbot and Wat committee decided on a building project, a construction sub-committee was constituted. This construction committee is usually led by an elder cieng (a craftsman like a carpenter or mason or builder). The chief of the construction, as a chas tom, also becomes a member of the Wat committee. A construction sub-committee chief explained the procedure he had to follow to get the building materials he needed.

When we [of the construction committee] make an expense we have to inform all the other six members of the Wat committee and bring the receipts to the committee. The treasurer keeps the record. The committee considers whether the price is reasonable. The abbot and monks just wait and look into the final report of expenses.

If I need some nails I to go the treasurer to get the money and bring the receipt to the chief of the Wat committee. The treasurer knows if the project needs the nails or not. The abbot and monks observe the project and if they are not happy we have to stop, it is the law. If there is a problem the abbot is invited to help solve it.  
chas tom, Ek Phnom, Battambang

All the members of the committee volunteer to serve the Wat out of a sense of piety and public spirit and they gain in the esteem of the community for their dedication. But a

prudent mechanism of oversight is also built into the interactions expected among the committee members.

The chief of the construction committee makes the purchases of construction materials from funds provided by the Treasurer of the Wat committee. The Treasurer verifies the approved expenditures and keeps the receipts for his accounting. The Wat committee oversees the construction sub-committee's use of funds in construction that was agreed by the parish, monitors the paid for material at the market, monitors the quality of the construction and watches the project budget. Meanwhile, the abbot and monks maintain overall quality control on the project from an aesthetic point of view, on behalf of the Wat as an enduring religious institution.

The moral authority of the abbot and monks normally provides a silent moral framework within which Wat funds are used and labor mobilized and construction completed. However, the abbot, as the highest local religious authority, can leap immediately to the forefront if there is any serious disagreement in the Wat committee, or if there is any dissatisfaction with the results the committee's work.

The accountability and transparency that are accepted as part of normal operating procedures for a Wat committee, and the way lines are drawn between moral and sinful use of public funds, may offer significant lessons for organizations created in the rural setting as part development initiatives

#### b. Mekhyal

One of the most remarkable features of the Wat as a civil society organization is the element of self-recruitment to a leadership role in the community. A candidate enters the monkhood by free choice and may leave at any time. While he is a monk, he occupies the highest status available in village society. From that position of respect a monk with learning and experience can take a role of moral leadership in the community.

Among the laypersons in the Wat organization who are responsible for providing practical leadership there is an expectation of self-recruitment to transitory and situational authority. The range of villagers of the parish with the skill, devotion and standing to be acceptable as leading committee members is well known in the parish and is based on gaining a reputation of respect through selfless effectiveness. When a project is decided upon will come forward to lead, often with the blessing of the chief monk. But leadership on the Wat committee is understood to be temporary and task specific. Recruitment to leadership in the Wat committee is the polar opposite of seeking a position or of holding an office. This impermanent, situational authority is captured in the Khmer term mekhyal (leader of the wind).

In Khmer this term has both negative and positive connotations. A mekhyal can be the guide who takes a commission for guiding people to cross the Thai border illegally, to seek employment. The guide knows the way and knows how to deal with any obstacles that may be encountered. A mekhyal could be an opposition political party activist who tries to organize resistance to a regime by trying to recruit members to his party. A mekhyal could also be a procurer, usually a woman, who comes to the village seeking young women to work for her in the city. These girls will usually be inducted into commercial sex work. Part of the negative tones for the definition of the role is that the

mekhyal defies the prevailing rules or expectations somehow, and passes through the community like the wind.

On a the positive side, the achaar, prittiechaar and chas tom are also referred to as mekhyal, in their activity to organize and mobilize community activity

When we build a school, the monks have no money, only the villagers have.

Only the achaar and the Wat committee can raise the money. They are mekhyal

like that flock of birds; the mekhyal is at the head The mekhyal are old people with experience and intelligence, even if they have a low education.

Achaar, Bakong Siem Reap

As this old man spoke he pointed to a flock of small birds that flew overhead. He noted that the flock always had a leader in flight, but when the direction changed, a different bird would be in the lead position. I grasped that mekhyal was a category of individuals who were considered to have leadership skill or potential.

My understanding of this concept of mekhyal in the course of our research and as we continued to ask about this role of episodic leadership and the activity groups constituted by the mekhyal. The main characteristic of the mekhyal is that his or her duties are temporary and are connected to a specific project or task. When the task is completed, the leader resumes the role of ordinary village. On the other hand, everyone in the village knows that any mature, experienced person who is pious and knowledgeable, or skilled and clever, is always a potential candidate for leadership to accomplish a task as a mekhyal. Thus a constant possibility exists for new leaders to emerge as they prove themselves in public projects that they might initiate.

One of the characteristics we often heard to describe mekhyal was that they had • gsalty spit • h (t ak moat prae), which means that because of their wisdom, intelligence and experience when they speak people will listen to them attentively.

Another important characteristic of mekhyal seems to be that they join in any work that they organize, rather than taking a supervisory position above others. Accordingly, we often heard of mekhyal who were village artisans who would lead less skilled villagers in accomplishing a project that was indicated by the elderly prittiechaar and chas tom of the Wat committee, who would usually not take active part in the manual labor.

Perhaps the most significant feature of the mekhyal is his daring. I think this is what links the negative and positive connotations of the term. The mekhyal takes the risk to rise momentarily in society as a leader in order to accomplish a task that will benefit the community. But he does so only temporarily and his appeal to his fellow villagers is cast in language that would be appropriate to a subordinate craving a boon from a superordinate. The gesture of status incongruity that can result in intensified mutuality seems to indicate the core of the concept.

The mekhyal understands the feelings of the villagers. His democratic ability is his ability to explain, persuade and advise the people so they can see exactly [the needs, tasks, results]. Mekhyal dares to solve a problem. He is not afraid to initiate a task. He is willing to coax angvo lueng loom [cajole, plead, from a subordinate position]

Chas, tom, carpenter, Siem Reap.

In so far as the Wat committee leaders are considered mekhyal, they represent high status elders who crave and beseech help from the community to further the common interests of the social and religious center of community life. These elders are willing to take the risk of adopting a subordinate stance toward others of the community, which is in contradiction to the elevation and deference they are due on account of their age and religious learning. This risk of status loss is effective as an appeal since it is justified by reference to the greater moral service in which everyone will be engaged. This element of risk is probably what accounts for the use of the term mekhyal for the Wat committee leaders, especially when they circulate through the community seeking contributions for a project.

We may also note that the mekhyal behaves in a way analogous to the conduct of monks of the Wat. The monks are the highest status persons in the community, but they have to beg for personal donations from the faithful villagers for their daily food and all other needs. This is the contradiction that creates a moral community of a Cambodian village. It is as if the mendicant monk were saying to the devout villager •gI need your material help to survive. •h And in placing rice in the bowl of the monk, it is as if the villager says, •gI need your recognition of my gift as a blessing to make this a good life. •h During that moment when complementary needs are recognized in a ritual an opportunity is created for the villagers to participate in an act of charity and mutuality that echoes throughout the community and reaffirms its existence.

When the mekhyal coaxes his fellow villagers to contribute to a project, it is as if he were saying, •gI need your help to complete a task for the common good. •h By agreeing to contribute his labor or money it is as if the villager were saying, •gI need you to risk asking my help to acknowledge my value to the common effort. •h The mutual respect that is generated by this dynamic of status risk is an essential element in creating communities in Cambodian civil society. And those communities may well not coincide with the villages and communes that are recognized as the administrative units of the state. The relevant community for Wat based activities is the parish. And the parish is only defined by the current decision of individual villagers in the vicinity of a Wat to take their devotions and offerings, rather than elsewhere.

In a recent paper on the nature of community in Cambodia, Willem van de Put acknowledges the traditional centrality of the Wat to communal life in Cambodia, but he notes the uneven progress of revitalization of religion in Cambodia. He also notes an uncertain process of rebuilding trust between people, and an unclear distribution of the self-help associations of the kind found by GTZ in Kampong Thom. In the present state of our knowledge, van de Put suggests, •gone rule that emerges repeatedly in looking for structure in Cambodian [society] •h is that •gthere are no regularities •h(p.6). This is a position that harks back to a controversy in anthropology over the so-called •loosely structured societies •h in Southeast Asia that appear to contrast with societies with a greater degree of structure such as in Japan or Vietnam.

Van de Put discusses the problematic nature of the Commune ((khum).a an administrative unit of French invention, and asks who the important or key persons are in this •gcommunity. •h He finds that in some khum, the village leaders are strong, self-assured, middle aged men •gwho seem to have a sincere interest in their villages and take responsibility •h(p5). In other areas, in Battambang for instance, he noticed that some village leaders were young, from poor backgrounds, and simply kept village

records. It seems that they are not the real important people in the phum (village)...The really important people in the khum and its phums are others, sometimes called the mekhyal. h (p.5).

Van de Put argues that for people who were adults before 1975 the notion of links between patron and client are still meaningful. He probably refers here to people who are now over 40, who comprise about 30% of the present voting age population. For younger people, h (that is, the remaining 70% of the present voting age population) van de Put continues, there is a concept of relations characterized by a calculation of immediate mutual benefit. h(p.5). For van de Put, this concept of relations suggests that, as is often heard, trust is lacking in Cambodian society. h(p.5).

In my understanding of the mekhyal, this is indeed a leadership role that deals in short-lived cooperation for immediate benefit. This form of leadership may be particularly appealing to villagers whose experience makes them wary of authority and cautious about trusting other. But I think that the real essence of the mekhyal, especially within the framework of Wat-endorsed activities in grassroots Cambodia, is that he or she can make appeals that can be successfully understood not only by a cost-benefit analysis by every participant, but that can also be seen as an invitation to reconstituting trust.

The key to understanding the mekhyal who is a leader on the Wat committee is to see that on one plane he may be a temporary leader in the construction of some bridge or school or road. But on another plane, he is facilitating a sense of participation in an abiding moral community. The villager lives on both these planes, the material and both of which are now being rebuilt as peace emerges.

The lesson for democracy building efforts, and perhaps for development programs, is that community leadership is part of a complex culture that may not be easily translated or deciphered. It would be a great mistake of ethnocentrism, already committed once by the French colonial regime, to assume that the nuances of grassroots authority in Cambodia could be adequately dealt with by exclusive focus on government jurisdictions and officials at the local level. The mekhyal is an expression of community solidarity at the grassroots that is connected to a unique concept of participation and feeling about legitimate authority. The parish, the community within which a mekhyal often works, is not a fixed jurisdiction, anymore than the mekhyal is a fixed office. But these notions are keys to a Khmer perspective of relevant categories at the grassroots. Any effort to bring assistance to Cambodia that is respectful of grassroots civil society will have to take these concepts and categories into consideration

### c. Mobilizing Internal Resources

The all important aspect of the Wat organization, as a feature of grassroots civil society, that bears on an assessment of democratic processes in village Cambodia, is the relationship of the Wat committee to the people who contribute to the Wat support. Everything we learned in this research suggests that a profound commitment to Buddhist values in Cambodian villages provides the discourse in which appeals for support can be made and understood. But villagers and peasants are also very hardheaded and practical. Accordingly appeals are often made in terms of both spiritual and worldly benefits.

The villagers think that working with the Wat committee and contributing money is making merit (tve bon). By making a bridge or a road that means in

afterlife you will have a bridge to cross over into heaven. But people use the bridge and road every day by foot, so they know very well the benefit of having it repaired.

chas tom, Ek Phnom, Battambang

The appeals for help also allow a wide variety of modes by which a contribution can be made to suit the means and capability of each villager. In the following example it is understood that a long process of community deliberation in the Wat committee and in the parish had preceded the announcement on the day when the work was to be organized

The loudspeaker announces a request for village labor for digging the pond at

the Wat. People come to work to earn merit. Or, if they are too busy to come,

they send money to buy ice for the workers. If they have a koyun (a kind of motorized vehicle) they might contribute its labor.

Achaar, chief of Wat committee, Phouk, Siem Reap

Many of our informants admitted that it was often a struggle to convince villagers to set aside their personal concerns in order to help with a community effort. Cambodian villagers probable have more reason than most peasants do to guard against the possibility that their labor might be coerced and exploited.

I have successful strategies for bringing to work and participate. The problem is overcoming their suspicions. I have to explain several times about what one and then another dose not understand. For villagers, they need real evidence to be convinced. We have to discuss why we should build the road, who will use it, what

benefit it will bring, how much work will be needed to complete it, or how much a

much a family will have to pay

chas tom, Banan, Battambang

Other informants pointed out that the youth of the parish required a special approach to draw them into participation in an activity for the public good. One achaar in Battambang said that when he mobilized the youth to help build a road in front of the Wat, he organized games between boys and girls so they could tease and send songs to one another as they carried baskets of earth. Another chas tom at Phnom Sampeu in Battambang put it this way:

We organize construction work at night because during the day young people are busy earning a living. At night they are free from work so they take time to make

merit and are happy to come to work together. To meet people at night and work is like having fun. I prepare some tea for them and set up a loudspeaker. The people can use it to play music from the tape recorder and enjoy together.

chas tom, Battambang

The chas tom know very well that providing an opportunity for socializing and courting that can take place in the evening is a way to draw the young men and women to work together for the Wat, even though these young people might rarely go to the Wat for religious purposes.

Those wealthier villagers who may disdain the physical labor can make an important contribution, especially for construction, in the form of money. The acknowledgement of their piety is a permanent record of contribution that adds to their prestige in the village.

Donors believe in the Wat because they see if they give money for a column or balustrade we put their name on it, with the amount of their donation. Then we announce it on the inauguration day. This way they and others might be encouraged to donate more money in the future.

Achaar, pradak, Siem Reap

Once community labor and contribution have built a structure it becomes a symbol of the community identity and a reflection of community spirit and solidarity which can produce a sense of pride in members of the community.

The villagers made the Wat and the school. For them helping the Wat and paying

for the school is virtue. If we had no good village integration, belief in Buddhism, we could not have made these structures.

achaar, Pradak, Siem Reap.

The question may be raised, are the projects that are organized at and around the Wat to be considered village development? Are these kinds of activities going to alleviate poverty in Cambodian villages? Are not canals for rice irrigation and roads to market better utilization of internal resources? The counter question may be raised, in the interest of sustainable development, is not wise to pay-careful attention to the cultural dynamics and values that motivate communities to organize themselves and, even in their poverty, contribute to what they see as the common good?

#### d. Ownership and Community Action

The question of ownership of the structures resulting from community action can be looked at from two angles. On one hand, any Wat committee project is associated with the universal appeal of Buddhism as the basis for the Cambodian moral community.

The reason that people trust the Wat, achaar is because the Wat properties do not belong to any one person; they belong to the people. For example, the abbot grows fruit trees. It does not mean that only the abbot has the right to pick the fruit. Anyone who is hungry can pick it.

The Wat helps people to dig ponds, builds dams. It the main human resource to develop the country.

chas tom, Bakong, Siem Reap

On the other hand, the very transitory quality of leadership of the community action, in the form of the mekhyal, compared to the relative permanence of the results of the

action, also affects the way the results are considered. In the following example, a member of a small LNGO in Battambang described how chas tom would form a Wat committee that, in turn, would form construction committees led by mekhyal.

The mekhyal are the most popular and active and capable people. But when their work was finished, their committee disbanded. The Wat committee explained to the people clearly that the road that they were building was not the property of the committee or the mekhyal, but belonged to the people, because when it was finished, the committee and the mekhyal disappeared.

LNGO leader, Wat Keo, Battambang

The attitude of humility and self-effacement is probably the most significant aspect of traditional leadership at the grassroots in Cambodia. The spirit of self-sacrifice for the public good among the Wat committee is an example of this humility. The ability of the highly respected and learned or skilled members of the community to adopt a posture of beseeching the community to set aside their suspicion and their personal concerns for the public benefit is another aspect of this humility. The readiness of the mekhyal to disappear back into the community after his momentary prominence as a leader in a task is another example of this humility. But since the leader of a project has disappeared, there is no proprietor, so ownership falls to everyone who helped with the work on the project and everyone who makes use of the project.

A leader no doubt gains personal gratification both in a practical sense of getting a project accomplished but also in a more subtle moral sense of gaining virtue and esteem. The donors to a project are commemorated for their generosity by having their names inscribed on the project. But the aim of a leader in grassroots civil society seems to be to have his reputation be inscribed in a moral leader and for his selflessness to be inscribed in community estimation, as a possible and temporary leader of the wind.

The kind of Wat-centered civic activity, leadership and participation that we have been considering knits rural Cambodian society together in a complex web of shared values, reciprocal assistance and recognition and community participation for a common good. If indigenous Cambodian resources for democracy building are sought, they will probably be found in this area of grassroots civil society.

### 3. Other Grassroots Civil Society Actors and Activity

Our examination of civic action at the grassroots has focussed mainly on the Wat and the voluntary associations connected to it, But there are also other civil society actors at the grassroots that should be mentioned, if only briefly.

In the provinces where we carried out our research a number of local NGOs have formed at the village level. These are often very significant in terms of the experiments in governance structure they are making within their own organization, in terms of the external funds they can attract to their villages neighbors.

One of the best known of these LNGOs is Krom Aphiwat Phum, based at Wat Kandoeng Battambang. Here is a description of the approach this NGO takes to its development projects:

When we aim to build a bridge we always ask the monks to help. The monks

normally have ideas about development. Every time they speak to the congregation the monks try to convince Buddhist people to help development in their own communities, because if we do not help ourselves, no one can help us.

So these comments from the monks can attract people to participate in our project of bridge building.

The best way to raise money is at Buddhist ceremonies, so the old respected people who go to the Wat every holy day are the best people to work with in development to bring benefit to the poor.

Hem Talika, Krom Aphiwat Phum, Battambang

It is apparent from our earlier discussion that this NGO is serving as a kind of Wat committee to facilitate an alliance between the moral resources of the monks, the internal resources of the villagers and the external resources of international donors. I think that the unique rotating leadership system of these LNGOs also reflects the pattern of a Wat committee, in which leadership roles are attached to tasks and not ranks in an institutionalized hierarchy.

It is quite interesting to find that many of these LNGOs are located on the grounds of a Wat. The luster of moral and spiritual elevation of the Wat can presumably be radiated to the aims and activities of the organization on its premises

A well-known small LNGO, Kunathor, is based in a Wat in Battambang in a village consisting largely of returnees from the border camps. One of the leaders of the LNGO, in charge of the credit program, emphasizes that this effectiveness derives from the fact that he is a chas tom known for his piety and his attachment to the Wat.

I have never been absent from a ceremony because I am a chas tom. In the village

we have to be a good example to youth, so they know that the chas tom is guided by a knowledge of bab and bon (sin and merit) and kun and tos (goodness and punishment).

For example, I took the initiative to collect the villagers to do the work like digging two wells. I spent 60,000 riel to do it, I told the people that these wells belong to everyone,

chas tom, Battambang

A small LNGO based in Wat Somrong Snor in Ek Phnom, Battambang called KLD is one of the many tiny LNGOs linked under the umbrella of Ponleu Khmer. This NGO created a saving bank and credit programs, initially with aid from international donors. A leader of the NGO described his activities and emphasized the theme of self-help that is so strong in all the Wat-centered activities we have considered.

we created this NGO in the Wat because it is the place of Buddhism for the villagers and everything from the Wat is respected. I took this place as a base to the people.

I don't think of the problem of no permanent salary in my work to create this

association. I got help from WFP and CARRE to build on canal, which we needed

urgently. They taught us so that when they stop, we can do it by ourselves in the future and not need their help. I got a small amount of money for myself, but I got

the respect of the villagers. This is a precious gem that I want.

KLD, Ek Phom, Battambang

The head of KLD credit program is a returnee from the Thai border camps where he studied rural development. His preference for an NGO mode of civic action was clearly formed by his experience and training in the camps. It seems that the transitory nature of traditional leadership, which is so central to the attitude of humility that is preferred in the Wat centered activities, is precisely what he wished to reject. I think his preference for development work through a local NGO enables him to achieve a degree of continuity in his efforts. The activities of local NGOs may signify a tendency in the direction of an institutionalization of the traditional role of mekhyal.

This informant was also a member of the Village Development Committee (VDC), which seems to represent yet a further step in this process of institutionalization of authority and

• leadership rights • h by placing village development in a partnership with the state, through the Seila structure.

Before we created the VDC on the instruction of CARERE, normally the village small scale development was led by a mekhyal. But it was not real development because the mekhyal did not study about development work and

does not work in a structure.

People gave loyalty to mekhyal; when he does something they follow him. But the mekhyal is not stable. After he finishes one task he has no leadership rights. But he has rights again when he leads new work.

KLD, Battambang

In our research we also tried to find something out about how government officials at the grassroots related to the kind of civil society values, leaders and activities that we had identified as generally centered on the Wat.

Much seemed to the kind on the personality and experience of the government official. Those who had been monks in their youth seemed to adopt an attitude in their work resembling that of an achar. They could, accordingly, work well with actual achar in the Wat.

The mekhum appreciated the Wat, knowing that the old people who know and understand Buddhism can gather the people to work together. The Wat helps the mekhum mobilize the labor needed for the work in community.

Achar, Pradak, Siem Reap

Another example of fruitful cooperation between government officials and the Wat-centered civil society at the grassroots can be found in many parents associations, especially for schools located on Wat grounds. For instance, in Pouk, Siem Reap, there is a high school founded in colonial times and used during the Pol Pot regime as a torture center. The most active member of the parents association is a woman who had

retired from the district education staff. She was able to assemble a committee of nine, including monks and civic minded people of the community

The committee members are those who do not cheat, for instance do not shift the boundaries of the rice fields when they plow. They help others when there is a problem like a house on fire.

She herself appears to fit the role of a chas tom in a school association that bears a resemblance to a Wat committee in its concept of civic action.

She contacts organizations to get help with wells, roads. She organizes work on the school and on the Wat. She is always motivated by bon (merit) and kosal (virtue) not about money. She is a good person, the people believe in her; she is always successful in her work.

Another association connected to a school can exemplify a variation on this theme of the employment of traditional values and discourse in a modern partnership between state authorities and civil society actors. This is a school support committee created by the local authorities. It includes chas chas (old men) and yiey yiey (old women) who initiate traditional ceremonies like sand mountain building or traditional games in order to raise funds from the population for the school.

While voluntary contributions of money are collected by traditional means and by the elders in civil society, the labor needed for the school is mobilized through the local apparatus of the state, which is associated with the coercive labor drives of the past

The Committee, plus the mephum [village chief] invite the mekrom [leaders of groups created during the communist regime] to a meeting to select a good day, and order the mekrom to explain the needs of the school to their groups.

Primary school director, Banan, Battambang

One last example can bring us back to the tension between the traditional Wat-centered approach to civic action and the more state-centered approaches. The example is given by a very elderly achar in Siem Reap. In his village UNDP-CARERE-Siela has created a VDC headed by a man in his twenties.

The VDC is headed by a very young man. Angka [organization; the international donor] wanted a youthful leader because they think the young are active and the old work slowly. The youth recruited can work with Angka, and he is accepted in the community

Achar, Prasat Bakong, Siem Reap

This achar complained that the VDC does not work under the guidance of the monks, as the Wat committee does. On the contrary, he said that the VDC works closely with the local authority to get good food for work from the World Food Program to carry out their projects with no involvement of the Wat. However the resentment and frustration of this achar were evident as he described a recent situation in which the VDC had to approach him at the Wat for help in completing one of their projects.

The VDC did ask the monks to help building the road, but they did not give them any rice pay, as they did to laymen in the village. When Angka had no more rice to pay for labor, the villagers would not work without pay. But the road was still not

completed, so they came to the Wat and asked the monks to free to finish the road.

Achaar, Prasat Bakong, Siem Reap

This example alerts us to the fact that dramatic changes are underway in Cambodian villages. Unskilled village labor, which was traditionally coaxed mekhyal or forced by colonial and communist rulers, is becoming monetized. Development initiatives by the UN are aiming to link grassroots planning and implementation into state created institutions, the Village Development Committee (VDC) and Commune Development Committee (CDC). Civil society actors, like those centered at Wat, will undoubtedly be drawn into the orbit the state sponsored and UN funded development structures. But the question remains, what will be the terms of their relationship? Will state structures attempt to dominate and exploit civil society impulses toward community building by co-opting generosity and service as the required •glocal contributions• h to attract state funding for state approved project? Or will state structures and civil society actors manage to develop a mutually respectful partnership, based on the democratic resources in Cambodian culture, in service to strengthening local community identity?

The conclusion we reach in this study is that democracy building efforts in Cambodia, of the kind that donors like Forum Syd and Diakonia contemplate, will have to orient their activities with respect to the Cambodian reality of divergence between the authoritarian and centralizing tendencies of the state and its bureaucracy on one had, and the pluralistic, intensely local community building tendencies of grassroots civil society on the other.

These democracy building efforts will have to consider such issues as •gp participation, • h •g ownership, • h and •g empowerment in decision making • h both from a Western material- development point of view and a Cambodian social-ethical point of view in order to reflect cultural sensitivity. The •g accountability • h of leaders will have to be considered both from a rational political point of view of office and responsibilities to which individuals may be elected, and from the moral and cultural point of view of a community consensus that makes leadership legitimate.

## V. CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion to this paper I would like to raise some questions that emerge from the study, which might serve as points of departure for future discussion and debate.

1. In order to strengthen civil society, what is the proper posture of NGOs toward the state, in the present context? Should this relationship be based on a concept of partnership? Subservience? Opposition?

What are the opportunities and threats involved in the posture chosen for the long-term aim to strengthen democracy?

2. Can the lessons on democratic practices from Cambodian traditional grassroots society be applied to the political culture of the urban centers?

How could these lessons be made available and be made persuasive to political leaders at the national level? What part could NGOs play in such an effort?

3. Should NGOs promote or resist the effort to monetize, secularize and bureaucratize civil society relationships at the grassroots?

What are the social and cultural costs and benefits involved in this decision, and what will be the impact of these developments on grassroots democratic structures that have been described in paper?

4. How could donors invest in projects in Cambodia that would strengthen civil society both in demanding improvements and reform and reduction of abuses of the state and in supplying public governance functions outside the reach of the state?

5. Are there ways the Human Rights and Development organizations could create a useful dialogue together on their common goals to strengthen democracy in Cambodia?

For example, could the Development IOs and NGOs be useful in providing leverage in the province where they operate to help Human Rights NGOs solve problems of human rights abuses by provincial officials? Could Human Rights NGOs be useful in strengthening the good governance aspect of the grassroots development committees that are emerging?

6. Is it appropriate and or feasible for external donor aid to be given to Wats or Wat committees with a view to strengthening the capacity of Religion in Cambodia to provide leadership in civil society?

What training of monks or Wat committee members could be envisioned that would be culturally appropriate and that would equip these key villagers with improved capability to supply public governance functions, like conflict mediation, and to lead in demanding democratic reforms, good governance, the rule of law, social justice and development?

What special capacity building activities based in the Wat could be envisioned to strengthen the role of nuns and female parishioners in grassroots democracy building efforts?

7. How could the micro-LNGOs that are often located in Wats, and that usually have very limited development aims, be strengthened as leaders of grassroots civil society?

What training and capacity building and resources can be envisioned to strengthen the dialogue between grassroots Cambodian development and human rights NGOs so that they could coordinate their efforts to serve ombudsmen functions, to monitor the state development activities, to investigate abuses, to provide a channel for complaints and, in general, to demand accountability and transparency of the decentralized development structure being built in the Provinces?

8. How could the new village Development Committees of the Seila structure be strengthened as leaders of grassroots civil society?

What training and capacity building could be envisioned to extend the concerns of the VDG from planning for local development within a rural development structure of the state to building consensus in regard to the moral and political nature of their village community?

How could VDCs be strengthened to exercise a civil society function of demanding good governance performance from the commune authorities with whom they deal in the development planning and decision making process?

## ANNEX

1. Terms of Reference

2. Sites visited during the study.

### BATTAMBANG

1. Banan Choer Tiel, Bot. Sala. Primary School Director.
2. Banan Choer Tiel, Bot Sala. chas tom, elderly woman.
3. Banan Choer Tiel, choer Tiel.. VDC member
4. Banan Choer Tiel. Wat Banan Loeu. Abbot and VDC member
5. Banan Choer Tiel. Wat Banan Loeu. Monk.
6. Banan Choer Tiel, Wat Banan Loeu. achar.
7. Ek Phnom, Samrong Knong, Samrong Snor. VDC member.
8. Ek, Phnom, Samrong Knong, Samrong Snor. Two members of KLD, an LNGO.
9. Ek, Phnom, Samrong Knong, Samrong Snor. Two members of SDR, an LNGO
10. Ek, Phnom, Samrong Knong, Kampon Sambour Members of SDR, an LNGO
11. Ek Phnom, Samrong, Sambour. Two Wat committee members.
12. Ek Phnom, Prek Khpop, Khvit. Chief of Wat committee.
13. Battambang. Chrei, Kako. Kunathor, an LNGO, two members.
14. Battambang. Phnom Sampeau, Wat Phom Sampeau. chas tom.
15. Svay Pao, Wat Kandoeng, KAWP, administrator.

### KANDAL

16. Kien Svay, Kbal Koh, Chroy Ambil. Chief of Wat committee.

### BANTEAY MEANCHEY

17. Sisophon, An Ambil, An Ambil. SEDO, an LNGO, administrator.

#### SIEMREAP

18. Puok, Knat, Knat. Chief of Wat committee.

19. Puok, Puok, Khok Srok. Woman head of Elderly People • fs Association.

20. Puok, Puok, Khok Srok. Abboot, Wat Tatok.

21. Puok, Puok, Prayut. Secondary School Principal.

22. Siem Reap town. Salakomreuk. Abbot Wat Bo.

23. Prasat Bakong, Kadek, Trapieng Tim. achaar, Wat Aranransey.

24. Prasat Bakong, Bakong, Olak. VDC Chief.

25. Prasat Bakong, Bakong, Olak. Villge Chief

26. Prasat Bakong, Bakong, Olak. achaar.

27. Prasat. Bakong, Bakong, Olak. Chas tom.

28. Prasat. Bakomg, Bakong, Olak. Khum official.

29. Siem. Reap,?, Pradak. achaar, Wat Pathitsatha Pradak.

30. Siem. Reap, Kuchok, Angkor Krao. Chas tom.

31. Siem. Reap, Kuchok Angkor Krao. Chas tom.

32. Siem. Reap, Slar Kram, Trieng. Junior High School Principal.

33. Siem.Reap, Slar Kram, Trieng, Achaar, Wat Indrakosa.

34. Siem Reap, Siem Reap, Krasang Roling. Abbot, Wat Athvear.

35. Siem Reap, Nokor Thom, Sras Srang Cheung. VDC member, Literacy teacher.

35. Siem Reap, Nokor Thom, Sras Srang Cheung.VDC Chief, Deputy Village Chief.

35. Siem Reap, Nokor Thom, Sras Srang Cheung. Chas tom.

35. Siem Reap, Nokor Thom, Sras Srang Cheung. Village chief.

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## 6. Summary of the Workshop Discussion

[OPENTNG]

### 1. Introduction

[Forum Syd]

1. Forum Syd has been in Cambodia since 1993; Diakonia has been in Cambodia since 1991. These are Swedish links to the Cambodian NGOs.
2. The sponsors are interested in raising the questions:
  - a. What is democracy in Cambodia?
  - b. Where will Cambodia be in the year 2020?
  - c. Is there need for international help to move from the present situation in 1998 to the desired situation in 2020?
  - d. If so, what help would be the best?
  - e. Is there a forum in Cambodia in which the desired situation for democracy in Cambodia in 2020 could be discussed and deliberated?

### 2. Presentation of the CAS paper •gGrassroots Civil Society in Cambodia. •h

[CAS]

1. The relation between State, Civil Society, Family
2. The relation between the State, Civil Society, The Market, Political Parties.
3. The characteristics of civil society groupings.
4. The distinction between two models for assisting Cambodia:

- a. The bureaucratic, legal- rational, literate, standardized model.
  - b. The self-help, traditional, oral, localized model.
5. The conception of the Wat and its relations to civil society.
6. The conception of the village Development Committee and its relation to civil society.
7. The relationship of civil society grouping at the grassroots and the state.
- a. In demanding good governance performance.
  - b. In supplying governance functions locally
8. Every NGO can assess its own position in civil society with respect to its objectives for Cambodia in 2020, and with respect to its evolving relations with the state

[COFFEE BREAK]

(.Shooting at demonstrators heard in the street near the hotel and at Wat Lanka nearby.)

9. The current events outside our meeting draw attention to the growing assertiveness of Buddhism in social affairs.
10. The Wat Committee
- a. The relation of sacred-secular at the grassroots.
  - b. The abbot-achaar; The monks-lay elders.
  - c. Wat Committee organization.
  - d. Wat Committee finances.
11. The parish as a focus for attention preferable to government jurisdictions of village and commune.
12. The mekhyal.
- a. A daring, episodic leader of self-help community activities.
  - b. Requiring the stance of begging fellow villagers to cooperate (on the pattern of the monk).
  - c. Situational authority of concerted activity, leaving the community as owner of the results of the effort.
  - d. The expectation of transient leadership empowers every participant and minimizes dependence on authority.
  - e. The mekhyal in a Wat context as a focal point for solidarity building, creation of a moral community, fostering democratic participation.

### 3. Questions, Discussion.

[Forum Syd] What is the position of women?

[CAS] chas tom are very often the respected elder women in the community and are very influential.

[CARERE] The bureaucratic versus self- help dichotomy should be rephrased to be decentralized governance (which brings improved services, improved access to resources and access to resources by women) versus the traditional model (which is conservative, static, hierarchical and male dominated).

[CAS] Regardless of the terminology used, each Cambodian NGO has to assess its relationship to the state, and to other groupings of civil society. Every. Every NGO has to ask the question: What kind of relationship is likely to advance democracy in Cambodia in the current circumstance?

[CAS] The Wat Committee was manipulated by the state during the communist PRK period, by the device of placing a government controlled Building Committee above the abbot of the Wat. The tendency of the state in recent Cambodian history has been to centralize authority and to dominate civil society grouping, including the Wat.

[Forum Sud] For development purposes focussed on women, would an approach through the family be preferable?

[LUNCH BREAK]

[Forum Syd] What is the source of social dynamism in Civil Society, State, Family, Individual?

[CAS] The Wat a community center in civil society serves as a venue where families and individuals can interact at a level removed from mere familial or personal concerns  
A civil society grouping (like the Wat or NGO) transcends family boundaries and permits the individual to participate in larger scale social action.

[?] What is the relation of civil society to the CPP?

[CAS] Political parties contend for control of the state and so they are outside the framework for civil society used in this study. Civil society is distinct and separate from the state.

[Forum Syd/ CARERE] What is the relation of the parish to villages and communes?

[CAS] The French colonial administration codified the village and invented • gcommunes • h as jurisdictions early in 20 century in order to rule the rural populace of Cambodia.  
The parish of the Wat is ever-changing, depending, on the judgement of individual

villagers about which Wat in the vicinity is currently considered to be the center of their community.

[Diakonia] What other civil society actors were encountered aside from the Wat Committee?

[CAS] The study discusses local NGOs, which are often located in Wat; Shool Associations, which are often associated with the Wat when the school is on Wat precincts; and Village Development Committees on which achaar and chas tom often serve, and which monks often advise.

[KWVC] This approach is very useful. I have seen that schools outside the pagoda are often not working as well as those within the Wat precincts. When we cooperate with the monks, we always get a good result. The people believe in the pagoda. If the people in the Wat committee are transparent [in their finances] then international help would be useful. But if the Wat Committee is crroupt, then international assistance would not be effective.

[ADHOC] We cooperate closely with monks. The Wat is safe and provides ADHOC with a sanctuary when we are based there.

[COFFEL] The Wat is the center of the village and has been the center of our training

[KAWP] The pagoda is respected in Cambodian culture, thus it is a place of safety. We are situated in a. Wat, but we go out from the re into the villages. We also set up an election in any of our development projects.

[ADHOC] The term mekhyaal has too many negative connotations, and should not be used positively as it is in this paper. To solve problems or conflicts villagers often go to the Wat to consult the achaar (a man) or with a nun (a women), as I learned in my village interviewing.

[Forum Syd] Could Cambodian women be empowered by international organizations supporting the Wat?

[KWVC] traditionally nuns do not have equal status to the achaar. But we have been trying to upgrade the nuns and they have been empowered. I have seen in Thailand the good training given to nuns and the result that young women get more confidence. Supporting the nuns would be good.

[COMFREL] We approach the pagoda, including the nuns, before our voter education training meetings, which are held at the Wat. If we do not educate individuals to take responsibility for their society, we will have no democracy.

[CIHR] One part of our good governance training includes Buddhist-based lessons.

[CAS] Election come only once in several years. But voter education or citizen education could be carried out continually. This is an opportunity for the development NGOs and the human rights NGOs or COMFREL AND COFFEL to continue their cooperation on a permanent basis.

[COFFEL] We have planned to conduct a public affairs program of citizen awareness at all levels, from village to high government offices.

[Forum Syd] What kind of forum in Cambodia could continue this kind of dialogue?  
Some of the actors might be [writing on board]:

NGO Forum	-CSWG -WWG
Culture of Peace	-AFSC -CRD -CSD-LNGOs -MCC -Silaka -Star Kampuchea
Open forum	-Local Media -Information Exchange
COFFEL	-86 LNGOs
COMFREL	-13 LNGOs

[ADJOURNMENT OF MEETING]

7. Khmer terms

aanaacak government power; • gkingdom, royal power, profane or civil power as opposed to sacred power. • h

achaar a male chas tom who serves as lay leader of many Wat activities

am pairs, by twos

angvo lueng loom cajole, plead, from a subordinate position

areak spirit

bab and bon sin and merit

bon and kosal merit and virtue

chas chas old men

chas tom respected elders, male or female

cieng artisan, craftsman like carpenter, mason, builder.

khum commune

koyun a kind of motorized vehicle

kun and tos goodness and punishment.

mekhyal commune leaders

mekhyal • gleader of the wind • h informal leader at the grassroots.

mekrom leaders of groups created during the communist regime

mephum village chief

naga dragon

phum village

prittiecaar a male or female chas tom known for piety and service to the Wat

puttiea • fcak Buddha power • gpower of the Buddha, power of Buddhism to lead its followers to religious purity.

roat amnaac the, state power

rook si gaining a livelihood

sel Buddhist moral precepts

tak moat prae • gsalty spit • h said of persons whose wisdom, intelligence and experience

causes people to listen to them attentively when they speak.

Wat Buddhist pagoda

yiey yiey old women

## 8. Abbreviations

ADHOC	Cambodian Human Rights and Development Organization
AFSC	American Friends Service Committee
CARERE	Cambodia Area Rehabilitation and Regeneration project
CAS	Center for Advanced Study
CDRI	Cambodia Development Resource Institute
CIHR	Cambodian Institute for Human Rights
COFFEL	Coalition for Free and Fair Elections
COMFREL	Committee for Free and fair Elections
CRD	Cambodian Researchers for Development
CSD	Center for Social Development
GTZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft fur Technische Zusammenarbeit
KAWP	Krom Aphiwat Phum
KWVC	Khmer Women • fs Voice Center
LNGO	Local Non-Government Organization
MCC	Mennonite Central Committee
NGO	Non-Government Organization
PDP	Provincial Development Program
PRK	Peoples Republic of Kampuchea
SEADO	Social, Environment, Agriculture Development Organization

UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Authority for Cambodia
VDC	Village Development Committee
WWG	Women's Working Group

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<sup>1</sup> The terms of reference for this study are attached in the Annex.

<sup>2</sup> A list of places visited is attached in the Annex.

<sup>3</sup> A list workshop participants and a summary of the workshop discussion are attached in the Annex.

<sup>4</sup> A map of the target provinces is attached in the Annex.

<sup>5</sup> The following discussion draws heavily on two recent overviews of the subject: a USAID paper by Leslie Fox, "Civil Society: a conceptual framework" h. Thunder & Associates, Arlington VA. (March, 1995) and Martin Krygier, "virtuous Circles: Antipodean Reflections on Power, Institutions and Civil Society" h. *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 11, no. 1, (Winter, 1997), 36-88.