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A JOINT RESEARCH PROJECT
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ASIA

PAINTING THE LANDSCAPE

A CROSS - CULTURAL EXPLORATION OF
PUBLIC - GOVERNMENT DECISION MAKING

1. ASIA

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Background

The word “participation” had been introduced into both Cambodia and China relatively recently by Westerners, and it was contested as to what extent participation already existed: some respondents felt it was a new concept and others felt it was a rebranding of existing ways of doing governance. Common understandings about participation in China are that it is either about obtaining information about proposed government activities, or suing governments or companies to ensure they better fulfilled their roles in the regulation and implementation of environmental protection laws.

Ideas about participation as involvement in government decision making are much more limited and isolated, particularly in rural areas. In both countries volunteerism was a common notion of participation. Traditional modes of participation in Cambodia have been one-way with the government informing the public about changes. The challenge now is about making it two-way communication. There was a desire in Cambodia for participants to be able to play a much more hands-on role in natural resource management (NRM), for example through having the powers to police environmental regulations. These examples all point to the divide between active and passive participation.

However, in Cambodia there were also many examples of where citizens were actively involved in government decision making, either about the management of local natural resources or setting government agendas. In Cambodia many consider participation to be active, a process that involves key stakeholders and their concerns in planning and decision-making processes.

Participation in both Cambodia and China is seen as a means to an end: either better governance, an improved environment, a method to obtain information or compensation. In both countries, the participants were often limited to NGOs or other organised groups rather than unorganised citizens.

In both countries, there was strong representation from those involved in environmental issues, and interviewees from both countries stated that participation was more advanced in these sectors. However, I think in Cambodia the interview about governance show far more comprehensive examples of community participation. Both countries have environmental legislation requiring the input of citizens into government decision making.

In China companies are responsible for doing this and prefer to limit participation to a couple of key NGOs rather than opening up the process for public involvement. In Cambodia it was the government that was responsible for conducting participation and it was those communities and people who inflict the most environmental damage that had the most participation work done with them. What this demonstrates is a desire to have maximum impact through NRM committees.

Involvement in the formation of legislation is an opportunity that was available in both countries. The use of the internet was markedly different in each country. In Cambodia, NGOs and the government have used it but it has had very limited results because so few people have internet access. In China this technology has been harnessed by both the government and citizens to enable public comment on draft legislation.

A strong theme across all the Cambodian interviews was the difference between theory and practice. Although in legislation and government rhetoric much participation is allowed and encouraged, in practice little happens, or the forms it happens in are relatively passive. With local governance, the participation is not as broad as the legislation requires, and they are only consulted on decisions already drafted by local government politicians. There is a strong hierarchy in Cambodia, affecting their levels of participation. Although this was not reported in this set of Chinese interviews, scholars have reported on the same phenomenon in China (see Baogang He's work). Status affects who will be involved in participatory structures and how active they will be.

Several interviews across both countries discussed the time that it takes to do participation, and to build relationships between members of the government and the public, and the importance of training to achieve this. The need for capacity building was strong across the responses from both countries. This particularly focused on building technical skills of the public and NGOs in the sector of interest, as well as the skills of government and others who are responsible for implementing participation. It was also identified that the public need to be made aware of the opportunities for their involvement. The benefits of participation also need to be promoted to encourage people to move beyond their apathy and to make participation popular.

Limited resources were also identified as a constraint to stronger participation in Cambodia. The lack of a sense of community was seen as a significant barrier to participation in China, as people did not feel a responsibility towards each other or the environment, and there was significant apathy. This is coupled with government rhetoric that the communist party is already representing the needs of workers in their decision making, and therefore there is no need for further participation as this is just inefficient. Participation in China is highly regulated, with citizens needing permission even to stage a protest. Participation was often limited for potential participants because of a lack of clarity as to whether they could participate in particular decisions or not. There is not this formal level of regulation in Cambodia.

There are significant gender disparities in participation in Cambodia, and minority groups are often not included in participation practices in either country. There is a

mixed response from government officials towards participation in both countries, but in different ways. It appears that in China the central government is more supportive and local government is more distrusting. In Cambodia however, these mixed responses occur at each level of government.

There is extensive formal and informal evaluation of public participation in commune development, which contrasts with other sectors in Cambodia and evaluation was not mentioned by the Chinese respondents. I must note that while respondents in both countries felt that the levels of participation in their own countries were low, they seemed in many ways to have an idealized view of either what participation could achieve, or what it is achieving in Western societies. There was not a strong recognition that few voices are heard by Western governments, that often those who participate are also older, middle-class men in Western societies too, and that usually participants consider issues that the government convenor has chosen for them. This is just a note of caution in terms of being too negative about levels of participation in these Asian countries. Note too that the respondents identified strong modes of participation that may not be recognised in the west as involvement in decision making: for example the use of the courts in China to sue government or companies as a way to change their decision making about how they implement environmental regulations, or the desire by local people in Cambodia to have powers to enforce environmental regulations (as how policy – including regulations – is implemented is part of decisions making about that policy, and part of the policy making process).

Process Report

In Asia, we had issues because of the changing security situation. As a result of this, IAP2 chose not to pursue interviews in Thailand. Our pool of interviews was therefore reduced to seven rather than the expected ten respondents. The result of choosing the seven respondents that we did between China and Cambodia was that there was only one respondent who did not work in the environmental sector. Although initially there was only one environmental person listed for Cambodia, the unavailability of one potential respondent in another sector led to replacement with another person working in the field of natural resource management. Having broader representation from different sectors in both China and Cambodia, as well as a broader range of countries could have painted a different view of participation in Asia. This is especially true given that Cambodia and China have fairly limited participation compared with other places in Asia such as the Philippines.

Alternative respondents could have presented different experiences if alternative sectors in which participation legislation or practice exists had been selected. They also may have been able to discuss the use of innovative participation mechanisms. The inclusion of female respondents in Cambodia may have given alternative views on participation, especially as all the (male) respondents commented on the gender differences in participation.

There was some concern from interviewers that their expertise in the cultures within which they were working was not respected. This was expressed as frustration that interview candidates had to be vetted by the project team who had no or little knowledge of the country in question, compared with the interviewer. This was also true in terms of negotiating how the interview was to take place, the consent protocol and the necessity of recording in suspicious cultures. Some of the guidelines about not being able to contact potential interview candidates prior to their approval by the project team also made it difficult to establish a rapport or even to secure their availability and so to work out whether additional interview respondents needed to be identified.

The timelines also were not clearly communicated or stuck to, which made it difficult to complete the project requirements when suddenly everything had to be completed immediately whereas there had been long hold ups waiting for information from the project team. The process for the project took a lot longer than had originally been communicated. It was compounded by two of the interviewers in the region relocating either from or to the country they were working on in the study.

There needed to be more clarity with the interview schedules as to whether they needed to be adhered to word for word, including the introductory sections. The use of the triple barrelled question in the consent questions was very difficult for respondents who do not have a strong grasp of technical English, especially as these questions also used very technical language. One interviewer also found it difficult not knowing the background of why the particular criteria had been chosen by the project team for the selection of participants, nor why the particular questions in the interview schedule had been chosen.

Several things did not go according to plan. The civil unrest in Thailand disrupted interviews there, but again it took a long time to resolve what we were going to do, which was frustrating for the regional coordinator and the interviewer. The interviewer there however felt that the process had been handled well and respectfully.

Some of the surprises were that the phone interviews worked really well, even in spite of respondents speaking English as a Second Language, and it also worked with respondents in Cambodia that I hadn't met. The interviews took a lot longer than expected. One of the challenges in China was the provision of interpreters by candidates who did not necessarily interpret accurately or completely, and in one case sought to answer a lot of questions directly rather than translate them.

Also a surprise was how useful the candidates found the interviews as a trigger for reflective practice and an opportunity to think critically about their work. This was mentioned by two of the Cambodian candidates.

The pay rates should have been standard for every region, with a price per interview and an amount for the regional coordinator (to receive on top of their fees for interviews). This would have ensured the project was equitable, particularly as the same

amount of money was allocated to each region and the same number of interviews was required.