

Field Note on Field Study on Local Administration Reform (LAAR) Program,
CEDAC has been working to improve local government

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USAID has awarded Pact Cambodia a five-year, \$14.4 M grant to increase Commune Council and citizen engagement in the decentralization and deconcentration (D&D) reform process in Cambodia. The Local Administration and Reform (LAAR) Program aims to:

- reach 500 communes in 10 provinces;
- increase participation and democracy at the sub-national level
- build horizontal and vertical linkages between local government, national government and civil society
- increase public participation in commune investment planning (CIP) and D&D reform processes.

The results of the LAAR program will be increased citizen participation in commune activities, stronger civil society partnerships with government, and Commune Councils that are better able to address the prioritized needs of citizens, especially under-represented populations.

The Cambodian Centre for Study and Development in Agriculture (CEDAC) is a Partner Non-governmental Organisation (PNGO) in LAAR. CEDAC has been implementing and supporting activities with the aim of strengthening cooperation and interactions between commune councils and farmer organizations, so that they take collective action to address local development issues.

CEDAC was also involved in supporting 41 communes in Takeo and Kandal provinces to improve local government. A project entitled "Capacity building of Commune Councils (CCs) to effectively and transparently manage social development projects" was implemented, in the framework of Local Administration Reform Project (LAAR). CEDAC has been engaged in this program since early 2006 with the aim to:

1. Increase citizens' engagement in local governance
2. Increase the capacity of the CCs to effectively address the expectations, priorities and needs of citizens.
3. Increase the opportunities of engagement to CCs, citizens and civil society in a policy of *decentralization and de-concentration* at all levels.

For a snapshot of CEDAC's work within LAAR, CEDAC staff conducted interviews with community stakeholders within Leaybo commune of Tramkok

district in Takeo province. Leaybo is the largest commune in the district with 21,600 people living there. The CC Chief explained that his commune receives US\$12,500 annually from central government to spend as they wish. The commune can then submit request for additional funds to carry out project they wish to complete. Leaybo commune is typically allocated money from central government to do one project each year; the cost of this project is approximately the same as the annual amount. The CC has therefore just over US\$1 to spend on each person in the commune every year. The commune has many needs, new roads, ponds, wells - infrastructure for example; as well social development, basic education on topics such as HIV/AIDS, agricultural techniques etc. The farmers in the commune usually contribute between 5 – 10% of the cost of a project.

The CC Chief described how he and his staff are keen to work with NGOs, because they believe the work they do and the effect it has is beneficial to their commune. He explained that since 2007 when his commune became involved in LAAR, **there has been a lot of improvement in the skills and knowledge of his staff**. The commune has 11 full time staff; they have been trained by CEDAC staff on topics such as domestic violence, HIV/AIDS, wildlife and land law. Using this knowledge they have been shown how to define and solve problems. Previously the CC staff did not have the resources to go to the low level to meet, talk and interview farmers to find issues. The CC staff have been trained and are now aware of the importance of people participation.

Greater participation by the villagers has resulted in better decisions being taken. This good governance has meant local conflicts between villagers have reduced. Many of the conflicts were over land ownership; there are still 4 – 5 disputes every month. The land law training provided by CEDAC and the issue of land titles will hopefully reduces the number of these disputes further. More people now understand the importance of participation, they ask questions, people trust the council and attendance at meetings is up to 60 – 70%. USAID through PACT Cambodia provide 60% of the funding for LAAR, each commune council is expected to finance the further 40%. However the central government is currently encouraging the CCs to focus on social development (unseen development) not just infrastructure projects; and will very often help CCs finance LAAR in their commune.

Under LAAR, Community Monitoring Committees (CMCs) have been established with the assistance of CEDAC staff. Each commune has its own CMC, which is made up of 15 selected people from that commune. Those selected are all volunteers and must be independent; they cannot be CC staff, political party activists, village chiefs, government officials etc. Their role is to make sure CCs **effectively** and **transparently** manage social development projects. The CMCs are split into two groups, one group keeps a check on when the CCs visit the community and note what they do during the visits. The other group attends monthly meetings with the CC and brings up things the CC is not doing or could do better.

Criticisms made by the CMC of the CC include: not updating the notice board, visiting the villages infrequently and implementation and financial problems with the project. The CC Chief commented that he and his staff often find this criticism hard to accept, but will try their best to change. Another group that has come about because of LAAR and CEDAC's involvement are **Community Based Organisations** (CBOs). They are made up from the leaders of various civil society groups, e.g. farmers associations, women's group. The CBOs receive training in advocacy, partnerships, participation, democracy, role of CC etc. The role of the CBO is similar to the CMC in that they institute transparency and contribute to the preparation of the annual forum.

Next we spoke to the leader of the CMC for Leaybo commune, **Mr. Vann Seurn** to better understand the project and its effectiveness. He explained that before the interception of the project his voice was not heard, but now the CC must listen. He confirmed that the CCs do visit and listen to the villager's needs; the information board also has useful information on it about wild land, land law and government information. Problems the CMC found with the CC were that the CC is poor at communicating with the CMC. If CMC members are unable to attend the monthly meetings it is very difficult to catch up, CMC members must always ensure they attend and constantly monitor the CC. He commented that the CC is not always forthcoming with the financial reports. When the CMC is able to view the reports they are often confusing and the CMC is concerned that the money could be better spent. However, since the project got underway in his opinion **corruption within the CC has fallen**. There is still a problem with small amount money being misspent, but not as great as it was before the project.

When asked about the type of development the LAAR project is promoting, i.e. social (unseen) development, Mr. Vann Seurn said he preferred it. He and his fellow farmers are largely uneducated and he can see **the advantages of the education provided by the project**. Training on land law for example reduces disputes and stops farmers being cheated out of their land. At the moment only 20 – 40% of people understand the importance of participation in local government. As a result most people do not take part in decisions on issues that affect them directly. Mr. Vann Seurn stated that he thought the CC was getting more effective but he commented that the CC still does not do as the people wish. They listen but always respond by telling the people they must wait. When asked if the CC are maybe unable to do what the people wish because of a lack of resources or power; he agreed but said that the CC do not push central government for additional funds or decision-making authority because they are lazy. He is pleased to see that the LAAR project has increased the capacity of the CC staff, but is concerned that if the LAAR project finished investment by the CC in unseen development would end and revert to infrastructure projects.

We also spoke to a farmer in Leaybo commune, he felt the CMC was playing an important role and that the CC is not currently meeting their needs. The farmer explained how in his village it is the village chief who is not working towards the aims of the project. People participation in decision making is down because the number of people attending meetings has decreased. Many villagers are not attending meetings because the village chief is not informing them of when and where the meetings will take place. The farmers thinks this could be because he is lazy; when asked if he thinks it is because the village chief fears that educated village could be a challenge to his authority, the farmer agrees that this could also be a factor. He would like to see greater cooperation between village chiefs and the CC. The farmer urged CEDAC to continue its work with LAAR because if the project was to finish he thought the CC would go back to its old ways.

