

Adapting the Participatory Approach for Poverty Reduction in Rural Cambodia: The Need for Creative Hybridization

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Cambodia remains one of the poorest countries in Asia. The Cambodian government has declared poverty reduction as its top development priority. Many NGOs have stepped in to help the rural population improve living conditions by means of increased participation in economic activity. Driven by international donors' agendas, most Cambodian NGOs claim to embrace the participatory approach to development in combination with use of microfinance. Through investigating a Cambodian NGO's approach to poverty reduction, this case study inspired critical reflection on the implications of adapting an exogenous vision to the rural-development context. The reported findings highlight localization of key elements of the participatory approach applied by the studied Cambodian NGO, including "community-based development" in the form of social enterprises, "self-reliance" in the form of self-help groups, and "participatory democracy" limited to the village level. The key theoretical principles of the participatory approach omitted by the local NGO featured in this study include: integrating indigenous knowledge, incorporating local voices throughout the development process, and addressing structural barriers that hinder full grassroots participation. A key lesson is that practitioners need to find the right mix of strategies and tactics called for in each unique development context. The author concludes with a list of thought-provoking questions intended to guide exploration of ways to adapt the participatory approach for poverty reduction *in situ* without compromising desired emancipatory goals. The need for creative hybridization merits particular consideration.

Keywords: Participatory approach, Rural development, Local NGO, Community-based organization, Microfinance, Cambodia

Received October 17, 2019
Revised December 13, 2019
Accepted December 13, 2019

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INTRODUCTION

Since liberation from the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979 and from Vietnamese occupation in 1989, the Cambodian government and people have been struggling to rebuild their country. In 1991, the different Cambodian factions signed the internationally acknowledged Paris Peace Agreement to start recovery under the protection of the United Nations Transitional Authority. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Cambodia has been "a staunch ally of the Royal Government of Cambodia in its effort to overcome the enormous challenges of the country's transition from conflict to peace, from autocracy to democracy, and from a centrally planned economy to market-based economic development" (UNDP Evaluation Office, 2010: ix).

Cambodia, with a population around 14 million, remains one of the poorest countries in Asia, ranking 143 (out of 177) on the Human Development Index (United Nations, 2014). In 2017, around 4.5 million people remained near-poor (defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as an income between 100 percent and 125 percent of the poverty line); about 90 percent of the poor and near-poor live in the countryside (World Bank, 2017a). The Royal Government of Cambodia has declared poverty reduction its top political priority. The prevailing development model in Cambodia focuses on market promotion rather than human development, despite official rhetoric about the importance of the latter (Hammer, 2009). The government's stated development goal is to develop rural regions into an engine of economic growth through cash cropping and agricultural-land concessions.

While Cambodia is slowly diversifying its economy, it is still heavily dependent on the agricultural sector. Among the rural population, 79 percent engage in subsistence farming (World Bank, 2017b). Yet, agricultural sources account for only 16 percent of Cambodia's total household income. Therefore, many international and local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have stepped in to help the rural population improve its income and living conditions by means of increased participation in economic activity. The use of microfinance to enhance income generation and job opportunities is a popular tool used by NGOs (Chhay, 2011). The microfinance sector, facilitated by both international NGOs and local NGOs, has grown rapidly in Cambodia over the past two decades, with approximately 13 percent of the population actively taking up microcredit (Seng, 2018).

Since the 1990s, hundreds of NGOs based in the global North have provided Cambodia with considerable amounts of foreign economic assistance. International NGOs contributed close to \$100 million over the last decade. Development assistance brings in more foreign exchange than any Cambodian export. International donors and NGOs essentially have been outspending the government on education, health care, social welfare, and rural development in Cambodia (Ear, 2013). These investments have stimulated interest among government agencies, local NGOs, and Cambodian elites in "promoting Western ways of being and doing as benchmarks of success for donors" (Gellman, 2010: 90). The majority of local NGOs are dependent on international donations and the priorities of the international donors have heavily influenced the missions and visions of local organizations (Bandyopadhyay & Khus, 2013). In light of these developments, it is important to reflect critically on local actors' experiences with implementing internationally-inspired development approaches.

In Cambodia today, about one active NGO exists for every 10,000 citizens. Approximately 25 percent of the population benefit directly from the activities of NGOs (Cooperation Committee for Cambodia, 2012). NGOs in Cambodia are the main non-state agents involved in poverty reduction at the grassroots (Gellman, 2010). Among the 3500 or so registered NGOs are a mix of several hundred foreign-aid organizations and a couple of thousand Cambodian-directed, local NGOs—the focus of this study.

Local NGOs are usually staffed by Cambodians along with a few international volunteers or technical advisers. They work directly with people in remote areas. Some local NGOs serve in an advocacy role, through which they engage in the articulation of social problems and their solutions by communicating on the behalf of particular groups, issues, and policies. At other times, local NGOs serve as intermediaries, connecting funding agencies, the state, commune councils, and widely dispersed community stakeholders. In addition, local NGOs often serve as business partners, development experts, project designers, and trainers for rural communities. Historically, most intermediary NGOs were engaged in service delivery and implementation rather than the promotion and empowerment of community-based organizations (Bandyopadhyay & Khus, 2013). In the current political context, large-scale mobilization of citizens aiming to bring about radical social change outside the context of economic development is seen as a "threat to the political establishment" (Bandyopadhyay & Khus, 2013: 672). Nevertheless, driven by international donors' agendas, most local NGOs claim to embrace the participatory approach to development (Demmendaal, 2010; Bunthoeurn, 2011; Pearson, 2011). Through investigating how a typical local NGO applies the participatory approach to poverty reduction in rural Cambodia, this case study aims to inspire critical reflection on the challenges of integrating an exogenous vision in the rural-development context. The next section will explain the research methods utilized in this study. Following review of key literature about the value of the participatory-development approach and its limitations in practice, this article treats

case-study findings and concludes with discussion of lessons learned from the evidence reported regarding the need to find the right mix of strategies and tactics for the local context.

METHODS

In June and July 2014, I conducted interviews and facilitated a focus-group discussion with 21 senior- and mid-level staff members at a Cambodian NGO's headquarters. I gained access to interview the staff through a senior officer from the selected NGO who came to my university for leadership training under a U.S. State Department-funded program the year before. Interviewees and discussion participants included two of the three founding members (the director and assistant director), four international volunteers who work as the primary grant writers, the social-enterprise marketing coordinator, the management/communication consultant, the organization-development officer, seven field officers, and 8 branch/project managers. I conducted interviews in English, a language all of the study participants were comfortable with although not their mother tongue. Given that English is the language of training provided by international organizations and the language of donors' agendas, data analysis did not take study participants' use of the English development lexicon at its face value. To figure out what the use of buzzwords such as "participation" convey in the local context, the interviews strived to seek out study participants' interpretations of various development terminologies by specifically soliciting the participants' own explanations of the terms they used in the interviews and in the organization's materials. Further, data analysis focused on understanding the local NGO's practices underneath the discourse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Participation has become a buzzword in the field of international development in the post-colonial era (Cornwall, 2007). Perhaps too optimistically, the term is often used synonymously with good governance and citizenship. Over the past decade, for example, the World Bank has allocated almost \$85 billion to local participatory development (Mansuri and Rao, 2013). UNICEF has required that the participatory approach cuts across all of its program sectors (Thomas and van de Fliert, 2015). Driving this push has been "the underlying belief that involving communities in at least some aspects of project design and implementation creates a closer connection between development aid and its intended beneficiaries" (Mansuri and Rao, 2013: 1). However, academics and practitioners question international donor organizations' definition of "participation." In practice, the meaning of the concept and the interpretation of the participatory approach differ markedly among the range of actors and perspectives involved in international development.

Traced back to its theoretical origin, the participatory approach concerns people-centered development and involves strong grassroots efforts (see, for example, Chambers, 2003). The key concepts associated with the approach are self-reliance, community-based development, participative democracy, and horizontal processes (Servaes, 2008). These elements are built on "underlying principles of voice, listening, engagement, and empowerment" (Thomas and van de Fliert, 2015: 24). From this perspective, participatory development is a process rather than an end. Advocates holding true to the radical roots of the participatory approach expect that local actors' and stakeholders' self-determined development goals will emerge out of participatory-communication processes.

While development aims to address basic needs such as food security and sanitation, its ultimate emancipatory goal, from the "participation" advocates' point of view, is to bring about social change. Social change exists when development practitioners "use communication to improve people's lives and promote social justice" (Waisbord, 2015: 144). Under the participatory paradigm, "social change and participation are indivisible" in the sense that "mobilized citizens define and act upon problems through the use of various communication platforms and tactics that prioritize local voices and knowledge" (Waisbord, 2015: 151). Emerging from Paulo Freire's vision of emancipation of the oppressed, "the principal objective of the participatory paradigm was not development – or

‘poverty alleviation’ – but the transformation of the cultural, political, and economic structures which reproduce poverty and marginalization” (Leal, 2007: 540). However, the interpretation of “participation” and “social change” vary across development contexts as different ideologies are at work.

For instance, the conceptualization of social change under the diffusion paradigm constitutes “a result of the accumulation of individual-level changes” and is primarily interested in maximizing effects of communication actions to spread pre-determined beneficial knowledge and attitudes (Waisbord, 2015: 151; see, for example, Busza 2004). The top-down nature of diffusion objectives contradicts participatory-communication principles as conceptualized under the Freirean influence. The distinction of these two conceptualizations of social change is essential for critical analysis of the extent to which an NGO’s approach is participatory as claimed.

In practice, application of the participatory approach is often shaped by the diffusion paradigm. The common participatory discourse observed among practitioners, as Mule (2017) summarizes, involves a troubling distinction “between ‘them versus us’ where host communities in the Global South are constructed in terms of continued need” (p. 64) and external actors assume that “the way to solve social problems in the Global South is to bring in more skilled individuals and resources mainly from the Global North” (p. 65). At the same time, Indigenous interventions often are “underemphasized or ignored” (p. 65). As indicated in many field studies, “participatory development is used to satisfy the needs of donors, sustain hegemonic power relations, and secure the dominant discourse in the developed world” (Jamal, Rashid & Drira, 2014: 15). Thus, the ultimate goal of participatory development is not always emancipatory. In fact, participation often is divorced from its radical roots and coopted by neoliberal development visions (Leal, 2007; Cornwall, 2008). Nevertheless, the de-politicization critique does not dismiss the potential of the participatory approach. Williams (2004) posits that participation may indeed be subjected to domination, but it can still provide the grassroots with opportunities for voice and its long-term socio-political outcomes are far from being pre-determined.

Through a review of some 400 studies of participatory-development based programs, Mansuri and Rao (2013) found limited evidence that increasing accountability and civic capacity achieved significant progress in reducing poverty. On the other hand, some field studies indicate that the participatory approach is promising in bringing about sustainable social change. For instance, in Marchke and Sinclair’s study, participation in development activities by individual villagers and the wider community supported a variety of learning opportunities that brought about positive change in the community’s sustainable-development practices (2009, 215). Although asymmetrical relationships persist, this field study illustrates how participation by marginalized villagers can lead to development through “learning outcomes that cause individuals and communities to challenge dominate decision making paradigms...and advance social goals” (Marschke and Sinclair, 2009, 215). While the transformative potential of participation as a development approach remains, Hickey and Mohan (2004) maintain that participation needs to be re-articulated in order to contribute to poverty reduction through serving broader emancipatory goals. The question is, how?

Given the potential of the participatory approach, this article specifically explores ways in which practitioners can transform exogenous discourses into beneficial endogenous practices and creatively overcome structural, socio-cultural, and logistical barriers when trying to reduce poverty in the long run through achieving emancipatory goals in practice. As a first step in implementing the participatory approach, Jamal, Rashid, and Drira (2014) suggest that NGOs consider the costs. Relevant considerations include “the value of time, efforts, and money which will be needed to be spent on: (a) learning about the values, customs, culture, religious practices, and the attitude toward life of local public, (b) having cultural sensitivity training, (c) having dialogues, interviews and meetings with the members of local community, and, (d) finally, costs of designing and implementing participatory methods and strategies” (Jamal et al., 2014: 15). While socio-cultural barriers can be addressed through these steps, the question is: how can practitioners address the structural barriers? Specifically, can the participatory approach for poverty reduction be adapted in ways that will fundamentally transform the rural Cambodian development context? The limitations of a local NGO’s adaptation of participatory communication for rural development reported in detail here serve to underscore the need for conscious, mindful, and transnationally

competent reconciliation of theory and practice, the ideal and the reality, the exogenous and the endogenous, and among different ideological influences. The key findings point to the need for hybridization in response to the range of in situ micro, meso, and macro factors. The article concludes with a list of thought-provoking questions intended to prompt exploration of ways to adapt the participatory approach for poverty reduction in situ without compromising desired emancipatory goals.

THE LOCAL CAMBODIAN CONTEXT

At all levels of Cambodian society, power traditionally has been in the hands of the religious and political elite. Buddhism and the pagodas have underpinned the hierarchical system by legitimizing the king as the ruler at the top and relegating those to be governed at the bottom (Ayres, 2000). Leadership and authority define and shape social relations, and thus discourage individual initiatives. Traditionally, in Cambodia, social order depends on people's respect of the status hierarchy and acceptance of one's place in it (Ovensen et al., 1996). Participation in governance has been restricted and "citizens have been socialized to accept without questioning the decisions of their leaders" (Pellini & Ayres, 2007: 404). In sum, a significant power imbalance exists "between small groups of powerful, politically and economically well-connected elites and poor and vulnerable people in Cambodia" (Oldenburg and Neef, 2014: 49). Consistent with this structural alignment, Neef, Touch, and Chiengthong posit that "Cambodian ruling elite has...instrumentalized international aid agencies in their quest...to formalize dis-possession, displacement and distributional inequalities..." (2013: 1101).

While Cambodian culture takes its model for the social order partly from the past, other elements are influencing people's attitudes toward participation today. Under the Khmer Rouge, many community relationships were destroyed. After 1991, international organizations introduced decentralization to promote democracy (Pellini, 2005) and individualism started to seep into Cambodia's social fabric. Since then, "traditional village structures have become the very framework of the newly implemented democracy" (Lilja, 2010: 302). Traditional notions of leadership have intertwined with the newly implemented democratic practices to create a sort of hybrid democracy (Ear, 2013).

Most villages in Cambodia have a Village Development Committee (VDC). These are community-level committees introduced by international NGOs around 1995 to carry out participatory development. The VDC's main task is to assist the Ministry of Rural Development and international and local NGOs in designing and implementing rural development. VDC members, elected by villagers, tend to rely on the opinions of leaders and authority figures such as village chiefs and NGO officers when decisions need to be made about development at the village level (Demmendaal, 2010). In other words, a top-down management approach usually operates in concert with traditional and democratic structures. Against this mixed socio-cultural and political backdrop, the study reported here seeks to investigate the meaning of participation to local NGOs and how participatory communication for poverty reduction can be carried out by local NGOs to bring about desired development. Although classroom theories and knowledge transferred from experts are highly valued, few Cambodian NGO staff have access to clear guidelines for translating theory into practices that would effectively bring about sustainable development (Pearson, 2011).

This case study involved a local mid-size Cambodian NGO. The selected Cambodian NGO (CN) makes for a fruitful case study because in many ways it is a typical NGO. The pseudonym "CN" will be used hereafter in this article to allow for critiques without affecting the organization's reputation. CN operates with about 20 permanent staff; one third are administrative staff working in the headquarters; one third are project staff implementing projects in rural villages; and one third are field officers or branch/project managers who are the bridge between the administration and the field staff. Like most other local NGOs, CN survives mainly on grants from international NGO partners and foreign aid agencies. Its social enterprises, namely two small-scale guesthouses and an eco-tourism business, generate supplementary funding for the organization's operations. CN focuses on livelihood projects in rural areas. It describes itself with buzzwords such as accountability, transparency, and

participation and it brands itself as a local organization. Its approaches to poverty reduction are similar to those used by other local and international NGOs working in Cambodia. Thus, the insights gained from this study are of useful applicability for similar local NGOs in Cambodia and in other rural development contexts.

FINDINGS

Promotional Materials

On its website, CN claims to help bring about a Cambodia free of poverty by using participatory approaches. CN's publicity message highlights that the local NGO seeks to work with local communities and involve local people in sustainable development. One of CN's key strategies is to ensure the transfer of knowledge so that all beneficiaries can implement project activities on their own.

CN's promotional material highlights the "Entrepreneurship Development" programs, the NGO's signature community-based efforts. CN advocates the use of social enterprises to bring about economic sustainability for targeted communities and for itself as an organization. The social-enterprise initiative relies on a co-dependent partnership between the NGO and the local community, as opposed to aiming to bring about full community independence. Community-based social enterprises established by CN operate in the form of self-help groups (SHGs). SHGs are small groups of community members that have joined together to create collective savings that allow for loans to group members to start small businesses such as ecotourism, hair salons, tailoring services, chicken raising, fish farming, and sale of local produce.

CN emphasizes in its promotional materials that the uniqueness of its "community-based participatory approach" is "living and working in the field." Indeed, CN staff reside in the target villages for extended periods of time. CN's interpretation of the "community-based-participatory approach" includes building relationships with local people and working closely with target communities as trusted trainers or coaches who provide technical skills. To carry out its specialized programs in income generation and food security under its overarching participatory approach, CN explains that:

- We are there to focus on providing for [local] needs sustainably.
- We support families to build their own [equipment] with parts that we supply.
- We introduce real alternatives in agriculture, aquaculture, animal husbandry and tourism to ensure the locals and the forest nurture and support each other.
- We work together with community market groups to adapt their sustainable livelihood strategies to meet market demands.
- We train communities in market value chains and how they can take advantage of price fluctuation.

From CN's perspective, "we," the experts, bring to the target communities knowledge, ideas, and technologies in order to enable participation and, thus, local ownership of the resulting development. The implication is that knowledge transfer has to come first and community-initiated development will happen later.

A story on CN's website describes that CN facilitated forming a "community-based organization" (CBO) consisting of a small group of villagers who advocated for the local community's interests at the commune level. The project aims at empowering villagers to use existing upward-communication channels to enhance grassroots representation in local decision making concerning development. Another story illustrates that CN helped five Commune Councils to conduct "vulnerability reduction assessment" (VRA) in villages within their communes. The goal was to empower the councils to conduct VRA themselves, support their learning about local climate-change impacts on livelihood, and provide ownership of the mitigation strategies. "Participation" in this instance requires learning how to conduct VRA, a tool introduced by CN, and working with CN staff, the outside expert, on making sense of the assessment data. CN also facilitated a meeting between Commune Council members and village chiefs to discuss how climate-change consequences could be best integrated into 2017 Commune Investment Plans. In other words, CN played the roles of a consultant and a coach for the local leaders and a facilitator between Commune Councils and village chiefs.

Taken together, CN's field updates on its website showcase successes that are primarily about improvement of basic livelihood at the village level, but not beyond. Productive "participation" appears to be confined to the small pieces of land in the form of home gardens that local communities still have access to and lie within the boundary of CN's project agenda for bringing about poverty reduction through livelihood improvement in the target communities. For instance, one participant expresses that the community's ancestral land is under threat from heavy deforestation and land concessions and that small-scale subsistence farming is the only feasible solution to address the poverty problem. My interviews with CN staff, field observations, and informal conversations with beneficiaries conducted on four of CN's project sites were consistent with these messages.

Organizational Communication

CN's staff-training manual emphasizes that "significant and sustainable behavioral change takes time—especially when you are working with disadvantaged and illiterate farmers." CN's implementation blueprint specifies that field staff should live and work in the target communities as mentors and role models for six years. CN's grant writer explains that six years of learning from CN is the prerequisite of self-reliance in the form of financial independence and that the ultimate goal of CN's community-based efforts is profitable participation in the market economy. This interpretation of the participatory approach is in line with the neo-liberal narrative of development, which CN staff explained is foreign to local communities embedded in the traditional economy.

One of CN's internal documents describes the steps that field officers are supposed to take to create "self-help groups" (SHGs), which reveal the form and format of local participation as defined by CN. Step 1 involves organizing village meetings to introduce the goals of the poverty-reduction project to members of the Commune Council, Village Chief, Village Development Committee, and villagers. CN field officers use the following guidelines set forth in an implementation manual at this stage of the communication process:

- Show the project's goals, objectives, and activities that will be implemented;
- Inform villagers about the implementation of the project activities;
- Generate interest and encourage villagers to join a group;
- Choose people to join the project activities.

Everyone in the village is invited to the introductory meeting. During the meeting, the CN project team asks interested villagers to sign up and, then, selects group members based on a set of criteria, namely permanent residence, age, gender, involvement with another NGO, etc. CN staff are in charge throughout the process and little grassroots participation is anticipated.

Step 2 involves holding a meeting with interested villagers, the Village Chief, members of the Commune Council, and the Village Development Committee. At this meeting, CI officers follow the following guidelines found in the implementation manual:

- Identify and clarify with people who have interests in project activities;
- Form groups of 10-20 members;
- Choose candidates [within each group] to be on the executive committee;
- Ask everyone present to vote for executive committee members;
- Set up duty for executive committee after election;
- Work with executive committee to create rules and regulations for the group.

Forming interest groups in which people are not related by kin, according to CN staff, is a foreign idea in rural Cambodian communities. Thus, CN staff remain in the leading role throughout this step, determining whom to involve and how each group functions. While voting, according to CN staff, is an alien procedure for decision making in the target villages, beneficiaries have the opportunity to practice some degree of participative democracy (see also Lilja, 2010).

Step 3 involves providing capacity-building training to help develop skills in areas CN considers to be vital to group management and financial sustenance. CN's guidelines for training SHG members include topics such as bookkeeping, meeting procedures, group decision making, conflict resolution, collective saving, internal lend-

ing, interest rates, business plans, marketing, market-chain development, etc. In terms of group dynamic and teamwork, CN has incorporated the following characteristics of SHGs from an international NGO's training materials into its "community-based" project implementation manual for field staff:

1. Equal participation (Members of the SHG should participate equally, in all the affairs of the SHG. Everyone has equal duties, rights, opportunities to share ideas, and responsibilities, and enjoy the benefits by being a member of SHG).
2. Mutual trust and cooperation.
3. Bound by affinity.
4. Autonomy (SHGs should function independently and in a democratic way, without being controlled or influenced by NGOs, the Government, etc).
5. Democratic nature (The activities of a SHG and meetings should be conducted in such a way that each member is encouraged to express herself/himself freely and participate effectively through participatory decision-making processes).
6. Non-political.

Such training aims to introduce exogenous ideas and practices that CN deems appropriate for rural development regardless of traditional values and local practices. For instance, a CN manager points out that "during traditional ceremonies in the village, people come out to help each other a lot.... But, division of labor, sharing decision making, sharing responsibilities, following an elected leader—that kind of things [sic] are not part of the local values." While there are village chiefs who are the leaders and decision making in the local system (see also Ayres 2000; Pellin and Ayres 2007), CN staff seek to instill in the local community that "everyone is equal in the village," a value on which "the group structure" such as SHG is built on. The training that CN provides local communities involves not only bringing about understanding of every step required for conducting micro-finance and establishing social enterprises, but, as explained by CN staff, aims to introduce new values, form new habits, change lifestyles, and restructure social relationships.

Interviews and Focus-Group Discussion

When asked "what does participation mean?" the most common response mentions building trusting relationships. CN's director explains that "we have good relationships with people. We understand their needs. When we send information to them, it benefits them." CN staff emphasize the need to have trust from the target communities to carry out participatory development. CN staff talk about trusting relationships as "teams," "groups," and "committees." According to CN's Assistant Director, working together as a team is a Cambodian idea while volunteering to serve on committees with unrelated people is not a traditional practice.

Furthermore, most CN staff interpret "participation" as "receiving help" and "sharing." CN's Director maintains that "we are here to help. We make everything beneficial to the local communities. Everyone has the opportunities to benefit from what we do if they actively participate in it." To be involved, a manager states, "they have to do business in their group...have to make contribution to support the community." For examples, according to a field officer, people "commit the time, comply with all the requirements, such as collecting sand, doing the construction, building the concrete." This kind of sharing parallels the Western concept of division of labor, which, according to the director and the field staff, is foreign to Cambodian rural communities.

Another word used by CN staff to define participatory communication is "discussion." CN's interpretation of "discussion" is about one-directional information dissemination from experts, mentors, or leaders. The director explains "when there are lots of debates, it's a slow process and it's not really effective." He adds that "project leaders make the decision," but we "want to make sure that we respect people's idea." An international volunteer conducted field observation to learn about the decision-making process used by CN field officers at the village level. She observes that CN officers usually determine the structure and responsibilities of the Village Development Committee (VCD), the election process, the types of candidates/leaders, and who the candidates are (Demmendaal, 2010).

CN tends to encourage the few literate and educated villagers to take up positions on committees. Consequently, the same people are in multiple leadership positions. VDC holds meetings regularly to make decisions about the village. CN or other NGOs, VDC, and the Village Chief usually set the agenda and villagers attend the meetings and vote on the issues. Decisions are made based on majority votes by villagers. Traditionally, the elders, the Village Chief, and people in authority positions are held with high respect and power imbalance is an accepted norm (Oldenburg and Neef, 2004). Villagers at meetings tend to rely on opinions of respected people, which often include outside experts such as CN officers, when casting their votes. CN's director adds that "every group member participates in decision making. All, at least those who come to the meetings, need to agree. If they don't come, that's their choice. It's open forum. That's the collective participation." While decisions are made by a few, all community members are invited to participate in voting. In this context, voting operates as "hand-holding," as described by a CN senior officer.

A project manager explains that CN's direct involvement in the participatory process in the form of short-term "hand-holding support" is necessary. CN staff understand that:

We can't support them for 10 years. We suppose to graduate them to become professionals. They have to manage the benefits of their community. When SHG wants to create saving, we create a link to a bank for them. In terms of accounting, we handle it for them. We give them hand-holding support up to 3 years.

Without hand-holding support, it's going to fail fast because there is no transparency.

While CN is mindful of "empowerment" in the form of "self-reliance" as a goal of the participatory approach to development, part of its interpretation appears to be future or potential, rather than immediate, independence. "Lots of training" and "giving people skills," the CN marketing coordinator explains, is a necessary part of the participatory approach aiming at sustainable development in rural Cambodia. No exit strategy is mentioned by any of the study participants. The hope implied in the training model is that self-reliance will come automatically with knowledge and skills.

DISCUSSION

Compared with the theoretical principles of participatory communication for development as defined by scholars in the Global North (reviewed earlier in this article), CN's adaptation of "participation" essentially omits the "voice" of the stakeholders. During goal-setting and project-design procedures, the communication process used by CN tends to skip the step of "listening," a key aspect of the theoretical framework of participation. Arising questions include: (1) Is CN's straying from the radical roots of the participatory approach a necessary adaption given the local conditions? (2) What are the implications of applying the globalized concept of "participation" in the local development context where political and socio-cultural traditions are not democratic and the concept is foreign to the target populations? (3) Is it helpful to use a development-approach framework with exogenous roots to prompt and evaluate the application of development practices in the local context? (4) How can we use theoretical insights to guide the formulation of practical suggestions for local NGOs such as CN that will enhance adaptation of the participatory approach in ways that contribute to achieving poverty reduction in rural Cambodia?

Given that traditional hierarchical power systems remain in Cambodian society, participation in governance is still restricted and leadership and authority continues to define and shape social relations (Ovensen et al., 1996; Ayres 2000; Pellini & Ayres 2007; Ear 2013). Therefore, the participatory approach involving grassroots decision making and shared governance comes across as foreign in rural communities. However, to local NGOs such as CN, participation is a desirable approach to development. As illuminated by the case study of CN, local NGO commitment to applying the approach can be attributed to a combination of factors; namely, influences from international donors, training shaped by theoretical frameworks popularized by the academy in the Global North, pragmatism, and the emancipatory potential of grassroots participation.

As revealed in the development-studies literature, the rhetoric of "participation" is used by international do-

nors who believe in either human-centered development or the neoliberal economic paradigm even though the meanings ascribed to the concept of participation by these two camps are distinctly different. Although local NGOs dependent on international funding are willingly influenced by donor discourse (Gellman, 2010; Bandyopadhyay & Khus, 2013), that does not mean that all local NGOs blindly follow the global trend or haphazardly translate the Western discourse based on lack of understanding or misunderstanding. Many local NGO staff genuinely believe in the value of grassroots participation in development as they have learned about its virtues through trainings provided by international NGOs and coursework in higher education. Moreover, the seed of “hybrid democracy,” mixing traditional notions of leadership with some democratic practices, has been sowed at the village level since the 1990s when the UN introduced decentralization to promote democracy in the country (Pellini, 2005; Lilja, 2010: 302). The complex interaction of all these factors and conditions help explain why and how CN adapted the participatory approach.

Apart from a mix of ideological influences, local NGO adaptation of the participatory approach is also based on pragmatism. As a CN staff member explains, NGOs can only hand-hold the target communities for so long and external funding will only last for so long. When there is little local or national government funding for poverty-reduction projects, it is practical to apply at least some aspects of the participatory approach to support movement toward self-reliance among rural communities. From a pragmatic point of view, aiming for full implementation of emancipatory outcomes seems likely idealistic given prevailing political, economic, and socio-cultural conditions. Despite partial application of the participatory approach, CN’s efforts have achieved at least short-term benefits and some desired outcomes. For instance, CN project participants are generating more income and have been able to communicate upward with commune officers about some of their development needs. Thus, from the perspective of local NGOs, participatory development remains promising. Clearly, fundamental structural transformation is not happening through attempts by local NGOs such as CN to incorporate “participation” in development projects. In the current political context, large-scale mobilization of citizens aiming to bring about social change is seen as a “threat to the political establishment” (Bandyopadhyay & Khus, 2013: 672). Full implementation of the Freirean version of participatory development is structurally precluded in Cambodia today.

Yet, the potential of participation as a political and methodological approach available to local NGOs that facilitates social transformation remains (Williams, 2004). The case study of CN has shed light on the possibility and the necessity of adapting the participatory approach to local conditions. Underlying theoretical principles are valuable by serving to guide adaptation in ways that help steer local efforts closer to empowerment while reducing poverty for rural inhabitants. Referring to the radical roots of the approach also helps to remind local NGOs not to fall into the trap of “institutionalized understandings of empowerment that seek to contain the concept within the bounds of the existing order” where, especially “in societies with historically paternalistic or authoritarian structures or current de-democratised neo-liberal regimes,” empowerment becomes “the management of power ... in the hands of the powerful” (Neal, 2007: 8-9).

In order to contribute to desired development as suggested by the theoretical principles of the participatory approach, CN, for instance, could devote more attention to advocating two-way-communication channels or horizontal-communication processes, not only at the commune level, but at the interfaces between villagers and local and national government agencies dealing with poverty reduction. Such communication processes would allow CN to collaborate with local actors to find ways to reframe training materials developed by international organizations in local cultural terms and link foreign ideas and concepts to local values and beliefs. Additionally, CN could work on identifying not only differences, but complementarities between the endogenous and the exogenous. For instance, a critical practical and principled step for CN to consider would be to integrate indigenous knowledge of the environment in the livelihood-project design.

Indigenous communities have long-established processes to manage their affairs (see, for example, Mule, 2017). The foundational bases of indigenous peoples’ poverty-reduction strategies are the culture, land, and natural resources of the place. Protecting the indigenous social fabric, culture, and identity is a prerequisite for

enabling vulnerable communities to deal with their development priorities in their own way (Ironsides, 2008). A hybrid approach that emphasizes creative fusion of endogenous approaches and exogenous principles offers particular promise. To meet local needs, CN could start with what local people already know and build on what they have. The way in which people construct their own realities on a daily basis holds powerful implications for their ability to reconcile and develop new visions for their communities (Buzza, 2004). Instead of focusing primarily on training and teaching “the new best way” of using exogenous blueprints, CN could examine how indigenous culture shapes knowledge systems, relationships with the land, decision-making processes, social organizations, experimentation and innovation, and communication habits. In short, CN could strive to help integrate the best of all worlds.

Furthermore, the theoretical principles of the participatory approach call for supporting grassroots participation in addressing larger political and economic issues, including neoliberal ideology that is hidden under the “branding” of participatory communication for development (Thomas and van de Fliert, 2015: xi) and power imbalance as a structural barrier facing rural Cambodia (Oldenburg and Neef, 2004). Currently, such deep commitment and political will are missing in CN’s vision and mission. CN’s efforts in bringing about sustainable development by encouraging local people to stop cutting down trees or protecting the river dolphin by turning locals away from fishing to making a living through subsistence farming constitute small contributions when the major causes of poverty are massive land grabbing (see Global Witness, 2013). The aspiration of the Cambodian government to pursue rapid economic growth through private investments has led to the growing extraction of natural resources, particularly land, forests, and water. The associated evictions have alienated a large number of Cambodians from their roots and their livelihoods (Ironsides, 2008). Rural villagers cannot fight against people in power, large private companies, and rampant government corruption on their own (Transparency International Cambodia, 2014).

Although social stratification remains an important component in the authoritarian, hierarchical power structure of Cambodia, political and institutional development around the country is evolving in “multifarious patterns” (Marschke & Sinclair, 2009). This unique condition potentially could enable “participatory democracy to be pursued while overlapping with remaining patronage structures” (Ojendal & Sedara, 2006 in Marschke & Sinclair, 2009: 215). To help facilitate such hybridized democratic development (Lilja, 2010), local NGOs such as CN could work strategically with international donors to use their leverage to hold the Cambodian government accountable for fair and just management of land, natural resources, and derived revenue. At the same time, international donors that support governance reforms could also encourage and assist local NGOs to promote “bottom-up, demand-driven approaches” (Bandyopadhyay & Khus, 2013: 675). In addition to project support, local NGOs could provide civil education on topics such as the rights and entitlements of citizens. Programs contributing to processes of political learning among the poor and eventually (re)shaping local political networks “by building alliances not limited to the poor themselves ... [but also] cross-class and cross institutional linkages with different branches of government, NGOs and/or parties” would be fruitful (Williams, 2004: 100). In the current political culture in Cambodia, this subtle approach to enhancing citizenship and democratic rights likely would evoke less suspicion and repercussion from the political establishment while planting the seed for “authentic community empowerment” (Bandyopadhyay & Khus, 2013: 672).

CONCLUSION

Through investigating how a local NGO applies the participatory approach for poverty reduction in rural Cambodia, this case study inspired critical reflection on the implications of adapting an exogenous vision to the local development context. The reported findings illustrate localization of some of the key elements of the participatory approach applied by the studied NGO, including “community-based development” in the form of social enterprises, “self-reliance” in the form of self-help groups, and “participatory democracy” limited to the village level. The key theoretical principles of the participatory approach omitted by the local Cambodian NGO

featured in this study include: integrating indigenous knowledge, incorporating local voices throughout the development process, and addressing structural barriers that hinder full grassroots participation.

CN's application of "participation" has been influenced by both the participatory as well as the diffusion paradigms. The NGO's adaptations are shaped by the local culture, social constraints, economic-development policies, and political conditions discussed in the literature-review section. Participatory development in practice appears to be both "all-pervasive and fraught with contradictions" while providing "the conditions for these contradictions to be exploited by a range of different actors" (Williams, 2004: 94). The arising question is how existing contradictions and opportunities can be deployed constructively by local NGOs positioned to determine how and how far the adaptation of the participatory approach proceeds.

A key lesson learned from evidence reported in this study is that local NGOs need to consider finding the right mix of strategies and tactics and creating the right "formula" for hybridization of the participatory approach called for by the local context. Local NGOs with local staff members who are knowledgeable about the local context are better positioned for such creative hybridization than international organizations that are constrained by pre-determined agendas. Practitioners need to be "tactically agile in their use of participation" (Williams, 2004: 102). Derived from critical reflection of the case study are questions that serve to prompt exploration of ways to hybridize the participatory approach in each unique local-development context. For instance, how can practitioners balance efforts in mobilizing institutional commitment and political will for advocating for people's rights with addressing practical, immediate concerns for supporting people to feed themselves? How can practitioners insulate communities from destructive neoliberal influences while tapping positive impacts of the neoliberal interpretation of development through place-based, culture-sustaining communicative processes? How can knowledge transfer be carried out in ways that lay the groundwork for participation in the long run even though full grassroots control does not happen initially? How can practitioners combine the best of indigenous epistemologies and exogenous epistemologies? How can practitioners be "co-learners" with local people while playing the role of outside "experts"? How can practitioners constructively integrate into the participatory-communication processes indigenous decision-making structures as well as democratic procedures? How can local NGOs support indigenous people to take advantage of opportunities offered by development and create poverty-reduction solutions that respond as much to global processes as to longstanding place-based cultural logics? Most fundamentally, what are legitimate compromises when local communication processes do not meet 100 percent of the criteria of the participatory approach to communication for development or poverty reduction?

These questions constitute possibilities for creative application and future action research. Participatory communication for development should not be treated as a restrictive blueprint of practices. How empowerment transpires is highly variable across contexts. As seen in this case study, history, geography, culture, and the nature of social interactions, networks, and political systems all have strong influence in shaping fruitful adaptation of participatory principles. Thus, instead of relying on manuals and blueprints, practitioners need to approach the challenge of sustainable participatory development as a long-term learning process involving substantial field experience, unlearning of old habits and ethnocentric attitudes, on-going evaluation and improvements, and jointly pursuing all dimensions of transnational competence, in particular, creativity (see Koehn & Rosenau, 2011). Practitioners need to deconstruct and, then, re-create the principles of participation in each context. Expansive, flexible, and humane communication processes are likely to surface from innovative hybridization of the participatory approach. Social change will emerge when poverty reduction and other aspects of development build on organic movements that incorporate ingenuity from all sides.

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