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Abstract

While development-related conflicts are remarkably common in many regions, successful resolution of these conflicts, from the community perspective, is rare. The existing literature shows that early and sustained engagement with civil society has been key in securing better outcomes for communities, however, the activities and interventions of CSO networks that facilitate this are less clear. Based on more than a year of ethnographic field research in two communities engaged in protracted development-related conflicts in Cambodia, I find that through engagement with civil society networks, community members develop new understandings of development and development-related conflicts, particularly the role of the state in resolving or not resolving these conflicts, and awareness of potential solutions to those conflicts as well as of their own agency in seeking resolutions. These new understandings and agency enable community members to remain engaged in protracted conflicts, despite the high costs and barriers which increases the likelihood that the conflict will be resolved in ways that community members consider successful or at least less detrimental. The research indicates that sustained engagement with CSO networks, particularly local and regional CSOs, can help to ensure better outcomes for communities engaged in development-related conflicts in Southeast Asia.

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Keywords

civil society, development, conflict, development-related conflict, Cambodia, Southeast Asia, civil society networks, NGOs

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Introduction

Development-related conflicts are common in Southeast Asia, and their frequency may be increasing. While conflicts are common, resolutions that community members consider to be equitable or successful are rare. This article explores two instances in which community members worked with networks of civil society to resist development projects that would result in negative impacts on communities, resulting in cancelation or significant alteration of planned projects. Based on more than a year of ethnographic research in two communities where resistance to development was successful or semi-successful, I argue that via engagement with civil society networks, community members developed new understandings of development and their own agency. Previously, community members understood that their relationship with the state was one-sided, top-down, and paternalistic. Through their engagement with CSO networks, particularly information sharing and networking with other communities through the network, community members began to develop a new understanding of the role of the state in development and of the relationship between the state and the people. This enabled some community members to develop a new sense of agency to make demands on the state. Their new sense of agency contributed to their ability to engage in long-term contestation against the planned development and, eventually, in development projects being modified or canceled in the two communities, a rare outcome of development-related conflicts. The findings demonstrate the importance of small, regional CSOs in supporting communities engaged in development-related conflicts and indicate that early and sustained engagement with civil society can have a positive effect on outcomes for communities.

Processes of development often result in negative impacts for communities, especially poor communities. These impacts include land loss; loss of or damage to common-pool resources, such as grazing lands, water, and foraging areas; and other negative impacts. The negative impacts or potential negative impacts of development lead some communities to resist development projects, which has resulted in protracted development-related conflicts in many instances (Corbera et al., 2017; Schoenberger et al., 2017). While protracted conflict is relatively common, effective community resistance is less common and resolutions of these conflicts which communities consider to be more equitable are relatively rare (Baird, 2017; Beban et al., 2017; Dell'Angelo et al., 2021; Diepart et al., 2019; Hall et al., 2015; Hunsberger et al., 2017; Joshi, 2020; McAllister, 2015; Weeber, 2016; Young, 2019). Barriers to and costs of resistance are high for community members (Ear, 2013; Hughes and Un, 2011a). Resolution mechanisms are often biased toward governments and corporations, limiting options for communities facing development-related abuses (Dell'Angelo et al., 2021; Diepart et al., 2019; Joshi, 2020). As a result, solutions are typically imposed on communities rather than being mutually agreed on by parties (Chan and Pun, 2020; Dell'Angelo et al., 2021; Li, 2007; Ngin and Verkoren, 2015). This is particularly salient in Cambodia, where contestation is socially and politically discouraged and social mobilization has been increasingly harshly repressed in recent years (Hughes, 2008; Joshi, 2020; Vichea, 2015, 2016a; Young, 2019). Furthermore, Cambodia lacks a strong tradition of organized civil society and the concept of civil

society itself has been contentious in the country, which impacts effectiveness of CSOs and resolution of development-related conflicts (Brickell and Springer, 2017; Ear, 2013; Hughes, 2020; Ou and Kim, 2013; Rose-Jensen, 2019).

In the rare cases in mainland Southeast Asia in which communities have been successful or semi-successful in getting development projects altered or canceled, early and sustained engagement with civil society appears to play a key role in securing better outcomes for communities (Dell'Angelo et al., 2021; Kenney-Lazar et al., 2018; Ngin and Verkoren, 2015; Scheidel et al., 2020; Weeber, 2016). While CSO networks undertake a variety of activities and interventions in communities, it is not clear from the current literature how civil society networks ensure better outcomes for communities (Dell'Angelo et al., 2021; Ngin and Verkoren, 2015; Weeber, 2016). Via education and networking within the CSO network, community members learned about the responsibilities of the state and their own agency to make demands on the state. Their new sense of agency allowed them to engage long-term in contestation despite the costs of and barriers to social mobilization in Cambodia. And, in the case of these two communities, the protracted mobilization against development led to better outcomes for community members and to projects being canceled to substantially altered to respond to community and civil society demands. In the sections below, I outline the relevant literature on development-related conflicts in Southeast Asia and their resolution, focusing on CSOs and CSO networks. I then describe the two communities, Areng Valley and Boeung Kak Lake, and the research conducted in them, followed by research findings.

Development-Related Conflicts and CSO Networks

Development-related conflicts are common, and their prevalence may be increasing in many developing regions, including Southeast Asia (Dell'Angelo et al., 2021; Scheidel et al., 2020). While land grabbing has gained extensive attention in the literature, development-related conflicts encompass a broader range of activities, including construction of large infrastructure such as dams; conversion of forest land for agribusiness or managed forestry; economic land concessions; and environmental conflict (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015, Baird, 2017; Borras and Franco, 2013; Hall et al., 2015; Hunsberger et al., 2017; Schilling et al., 2018; Schoenberger et al., 2017). Schiedel et al. (2020: 2) describe environmental conflicts as "social conflicts," which occur when communities respond to "perceived environmental threats with detrimental social impacts." While much of the focus has been on these processes and conflicts in rural areas, similar processes take place in urban communities and the research examines both urban and rural conflicts and resistance.

Though development-related conflicts and the processes which cause them are common and increasing globally, community reactions have varied greatly depending on the type of conflict, the situation community members are embedded in, resources available to communities, and other features (Baird, 2017; Dell'Angelo et al., 2021). Resistance is one common reaction to development-related conflicts and development projects which communities consider to be abusive or potentially detrimental (Baird, 2017).

However, while resistance is fairly common, resolution of development-related conflicts which communities consider to be successful is relatively rare (Dell'Angelo et al., 2021; Ngin and Verkoren, 2015; Scheidel et al., 2020). Scheidel et al. (2020), in an examination of 2,743 cases of environmental conflict in the Environmental Justice Atlas, find that "environmental defenders," including CSO networks and community members, were successful in stopping "environmentally destructive and socially conflictive projects" in only 11% of cases examined. When environmental defenders and activists organized before development, this raised rates of success to 17%, compared to reactive mobilizations (Scheidel et al., 2020). Utilization of a variety of tactics and strategies by environmental defenders further increased rates of success, however only to 26.7% (Scheidel et al., 2020). Other scholars, using qualitative approaches and focusing on mainland Southeast Asia, have found a similar lack of success in mobilizations against development projects (Baird, 2017; Beban et al., 2017; Dell'Angelo et al., 2021; Diepart et al., 2019; Hall et al., 2015; Hunsberger et al., 2017; Joshi, 2020; McAllister, 2015; Weeber, 2016; Young, 2019). Because of the relative power imbalance between governments, corporations, and communities, resolutions are typically imposed on communities by governments and corporations and actual issues of concern for communities are often not addressed (Chan and Pun, 2020; Dell'Angelo et al., 2021; Li, 2007; Ngin and Verkoren, 2015). In cases in which communities have been successful in getting development projects canceled or altered to have less negative impact on communities, early and sustained engagement with CSO networks appears to play a key role in securing better outcomes for communities (Dell'Angelo et al., 2021; Hall et al., 2015; Margulis and Porter, 2013; Ngin and Verkoren, 2015; Rose-Jensen, 2019; Swift, 2015; Weeber, 2016; Yeophantong, 2014). Weeber (2016), however, argues that the mechanisms that allow CSOs to support successful resistance have been undertheorized.

Research has emphasized the role of networks in communication, information sharing, and making connections between ideas, individuals, and communities (Baird, 2017; Hennings, 2019; Kim and Ojendal, 2011; Margulis and Porter, 2013; Ngin and Verkoren, 2015; Swift, 2015; Temper, 2018). When community members become aware of the structural aspects of development-related conflicts, it appears to generate new impetus for communities to seek resolutions that are more equitable for communities, rather than to accept resolutions imposed by governments and corporations. Alonso-Fradeja finds that when Maya-Q'eqchi' peasants became "aware of the structural nature of their grievances" it resulted in affected people being willing to align with CSO networks and engage in protracted conflicts, including court cases, despite barriers and challenges (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015). A growing number of studies emphasize the importance of community members developing a sense of agency, to more equitably resolve development-related conflicts (Diepart et al., 2019; Ngin and Verkoren, 2015). Agency is characterized by a feeling of power and an ability to influence outcomes, which, as will be shown below, was lacking in communities before their engagement with CSOs. Diepart et al. (2019: 13) focus on the agency of communities and CSO networks in resolving development-related conflicts and find that "[a]gency by local smallholder farmers and their internal and external networks" can shape political opportunity

structures, creating possibilities for resolution. Ngin and Verkoren (2015) also introduce agency in their discussion of "missing links" in rare, successful community resistance to land grabbing, however, they do not theorize the role that agency plays in the success of resistance. This research indicates that developing a new sense of agency is crucial for community members to engage in resistance to development-related conflicts long-term, which contributes to more equitable solutions and better outcomes for communities. The following section defines CSOs and explores the role and status of CSOs in Cambodia.

CSOs and Development in Cambodia

Civil society has been described as a domain, arena, or space in which citizens form associations and networks, typically to influence the actions of the state, often when the state is not acting in the interest of the people (Cohen and Arato, 1994; Dagnino, 1998; Gramsci, 2007; Henke, 2011). In the absence of state capacity and willingness to meet the needs of the population, CSOs provide both the goods and services the state is not providing and space for community members to organize and contest against the state regarding these gaps (Cohen and Arato, 1994; Hughes and Un, 2011a).

Throughout I refer to CSO networks, which include formally recognized NGOs as well as a wide variety of informal, community, and family associations (Cohen and Arato, 1994; Gow, 2008; Hughes et al., 2011). While large, international, and international funded NGOs did work in both communities and this work received international attention, community members in both communities reiterated almost continually that smaller, local and less formal CSOs worked most closely with the community and had the largest effect on community organizing and resistance, despite their small size. This was likely because smaller CSOs spent more time in the community and had more ability to be flexible and responsive to community needs compared to larger and more formal NGOs with stricter mandates. In Areng, two youth-led organizations worked most closely with the community and many community members specified these two organizations as having a large impact on organizing in the community, particularly in terms of educating community members on development, their rights, and the responsibilities of the government, as discussed below. Volunteers and staff with these organizations lived in the community for weeks at a time, becoming very close to community members, which helped them work most closely with the community. One organization based activists in the community full-time, the other sent staff for several days one to two times a month, in contrast to larger and more formal human rights organizations, which visited the community for 1–2 days a few times a year. In Boeung Kak, community members also noted the works of two or three small, local organizations. One of these organizations was based in the Boeung Kak community and was also affected by the evictions. The organization, which described itself as a "confederation" following a community organizing model rather than an NGO, despite having registered as an NGO with the Cambodian government, had a close relationship with the community largely as a result of the organization's prior engagement with the community. A semi-formal CSO network, organized by Cambodian legal and human rights

NGOs, came together to support the community and other communities facing similar issues.

Cambodia has been a "hotspot" for land concessions, development processes that have resulted in dispossession of communities, and related processes (Baird, 2017; Dell'Angelo et al., 2021; Diepart et al., 2019; Hunsberger et al., 2017; Schoenberger et al., 2017). Cambodian NGO LICADHO has documented over 300 land concessions, totaling more than 2 million acres, in Cambodia (LICADHO, 2020). Most of these concessions are in rural areas; however, similar processes are at work in urban communities as well (Sahmakum Teang Tnaut, 2016). While communities and CSOs have organized against development, resolutions which consider community needs and which communities consider successful are rare, largely because government interests are aligned with business, particularly extractive industries. Protest and contestation have been discouraged and at times violently repressed (Aun, 2015; BBC News, 2021; Ear, 2013; Hughes, 2020; Rose-Jensen, 2019; Strangio, 2016; Vichea, 2016a). Activists and those who protest risk arrest, threats and intimidation, and even physical violence (BBC News, 2021; Rose-Jensen, 2019; Vichea, 2016a, 2016b).

Development projects in Cambodia are often closely connected to political leadership and the culture of patronage (Ear, 2013; Hughes, 2020; Hughes et al., 2011; Hughes and Un, 2011a; Kim and Ojendal, 2011). The Boeung Kak project was implemented primarily by Shukaku Inc., a corporation owned by Cambodian senator Lao Meng Kinh, who at one point, with his wife and through other corporations including Pheapimex, controlled concessions totaling 7% of Cambodia's total landmass (Bahree, 2014; Rose-Jensen, 2019). The Areng dam, like most other dams in the country, was to be built by a Chinese SOE (Rose-Jensen, 2019). Chinese-backed development in Cambodia is closely connected to other Chinese involvement, including overseas development aid and military aid, making these projects especially challenging to resist because they are enmeshed in the larger political context, which is characterized by patronage and a paternalistic and top-down relationship between the state and the people (Ear, 2013; Hughes, 2020; Hughes et al., 2011; Hughes and Un, 2011a; Kim and Ojendal, 2011). To resolve development-related conflicts more equitably, this relationship with the state must be reshaped so that people understand the role of the state and their own agency, which allows them to make demands on the state.

Owing to the history of contentious action in Cambodia and the country's history of conflict, CSOs are relatively weak in Cambodia and the state has often blocked CSOs from meaningful participation in civic life (Ear, 2013; Hughes, 2020; Hughes and Un, 2011a; Sok, 2021; Springman et al., 2021). Young, examining resistance to dispossession in Cambodia, found that while communities worked with NGOs to influence the government and the private corporations involved, their strategies were only somewhat successful and that these networked efforts "failed to leverage significant pressure and failed to decisively explain why the government… opted for a combination of strong repression and partial concession" (Young, 2019: 605, see also Hughes et al., 2011). Despite this, CSOs are operating in Cambodia and are affecting development processes and development-related conflict. The government has a strong narrative on development

and resists narratives that challenge the dominant narrative; see Mahanty and Milne (2015:8) on the "state's powerful and reflexive relationship with nature-society." As Hughes and others note, the state in Cambodia sometimes fails to provide basic goods and services to communities, which leads to conflicts between communities and the state related to development (Ear, 2013; Hughes, 2020; Hughes and Un, 2011a, 2011b).

CSO and NGO activities must be considered in the context of power relations. Larger NGOs have been accused of undermining or marginalizing community concerns, of being more closely aligned with the state and corporations, and of simply being out of touch with community concerns because they are located in cities rather than in rural areas near communities (Green and Baird, 2020; Hughes, 2020; Hughes and Un, 2011a; Rose-Jensen, 2019). In some instances, larger, Western-backed or founded NGOs have pushed technocratic solutions to resource governance which were divorced from regional politics, and thus not realistic for the situation (Banks et al., 2015; Esteves et al., 2009; Green and Baird, 2020; Rose-Jensen, 2019). In the case of the conflict over the Lower Sesan 2 dam in Cambodia, two different NGOs worked with the community, one to organize community members against the dam, and one, more government-aligned, worked to generate support for the dam (Baird, 2016). As a result, there has been significant friction between larger, international, and especially Western-backed or funded NGO networks and local CSOs and networks. Based on my long-term engagement with communities and interviews with community members, smaller CSOs and regional CSO networks have closer ties with communities and have more of an effect on how communities perceive development and development-related conflicts. It has also been noted that communities are not homogenous and that some community members may be more amenable to development (Baird, 2017; Green and Baird, 2020; Rose-Jensen, 2019). In the next section, I explore the development context in Cambodia and outline both cases, Areng and Boeung Kak.

Case and Cambodian Context

Areng and Boeung Kak Lake were selected as case studies because while they are fairly typical of communities engaged in development-related conflicts they are quite unique in that resistance in the communities resulted in development plans being canceled or substantially altered, which is rare. My research found that the majority of community members did not support the planned development in these two communities, though there were residents in Areng who supported or were ambivalent about the dam and a prominent but small group of former Boeung Kak residents who supported development in the community (see also Brickell, 2014; McGinn, 2013; Rose-Jensen, 2019). In Areng, the dam project has been placed on indefinite hold, the first time that a community in Cambodia successfully resisted a dam (Radio Free Asia, 2014). In Boeung Kak, while more than 3,000 households were evicted, the development corporations involved were forced to delay and significantly alter development plans and more than 1,000 households successfully resisted eviction; more than 600 subsequently receive land titles (Eyler, 2019; Rose-Jensen, 2019). Furthermore, the intensity of resistance in

Boeung Kak has set a precedent for more recent urban evictions in Phnom Penh, which have involved more compensation for affected community members and significantly less conflict (Rose-Jensen, 2017).

Areng Valley is in the Cardamom Mountain range in Cambodia's southwestern Koh Kong province. In 2007, the Cambodian government signed an MOU with a Chinese corporation to study and develop a hydroelectric dam on the Areng River (Pye and Cuddy, 2014). When feasibility studies for the dam began around 2013, several CSOs worked to educate the community on the potential negative impacts of the dam and support a campaign of resistance to the dam. Two small, youth-led organizations were instrumental in educating community members, fostering a resistance movement in the community, and in helping Areng residents to network with other communities facing development-related conflicts, including neighboring Atai and Tatai, where dam resistance failed to coalesce before construction of the dam began and was unsuccessful, and Prey Lang, where communities working with a CSO network have had some success in stopping deforestation. In interviews, community members emphasized the role of these two smaller CSOs, a registered NGO supporting a youth network and an unregistered and semi-formal activist network, in supporting the community, compared to larger, formal NGOs which also worked with the community to support anti-dam resistance. The resistance in Areng featured both institutional and noninstitutional forms of contestation: community members both worked with lawyers to lodge court cases and staged public demonstrations, at one point physically blocking construction equipment and workers from entering the valley (Planet Experts, 2014). A wide range of community members took part in protests and CSO activities against the dam. Many protests were led by older women residents of the community and a core group of younger people working with the two youth CSOs did much of the work of organizing the community and networking with other communities, especially rural–urban networking.

In 2015, after the arrest of several Areng activists and the deportation of a controversial NGO leader, Prime Minister Hun Sen announced that the Areng dam project would be suspended until at least 2018, the end of his then-current mandate, saying in the announcement that "Now I beg you to stop talking about" the dam (Cheang, 2015). In 2017, the Cambodian government announced again that there was no active plan to develop a dam on the Areng River (Narim, 2017). The Areng dam was the first and thus far only dam project in Cambodia to be canceled in the face of community and CSO resistance. While technical feasibility or potential economic success of the project likely played a role in cancellation of the project, the timing and content of the government's announcement and Prime Minister Hun Sen's comments asking activists and community members to be silent on the dam indicates that community resistance was a factor in cancelation of the project.

Boeung Kak Lake neighborhood is a poor-to-middle-class community in the center/north of Phnom Penh. The area had a reputation for drug and sex trade associated with low-budget tourism and many have classified the area as a slum, however, residents dispute this. Boeung Kak was Phnom Penh's largest lake and a seasonal flooding

reservoir. In 2007, the Cambodian government leased 133 hectares of the lake and the land around it to a private corporation for development into a mixed-used condo and shopping area (De Launey, 2011; Vichea, 2017). With the support of the Phnom Penh municipality and government security forces, the corporation filled the lake and began the process of evicting the 4,000 households living on and around the lake (Inclusive Development International, 2016; Vichea, 2017). As in Areng, while several CSOs and NGOs were active in developing and supporting resistance to evictions, community members highlighted the role of two smaller CSOs, one of which was based in Boeung Kak, had a prior relationship with the community, and was also affected by the evictions. The community, supported by CSOs, engaged in several years of intense resistance to the evictions, using institutional and non-institutional tactics. Women—middle-aged and older—emerged as the leaders of the protest movement in Boeung Kak, to the point that it has been characterized as a women's issue (Brickell, 2013, 2014; McGinn, 2013). However, many residents took part in the protests regardless of age and gender and community member estimate that the majority of residents did not support the planned development in the community.

More than 3,000 households were evicted, however, nearly 1,000 households successfully resisted forced eviction and more than 600 subsequently secured land titles (Eyler, 2019; Rose-Jensen, 2019). While on the surface eviction of 3,000 households may not appear to be a case of successful resistance, the Boeung Kak community was far more successful in resisting eviction than similar communities where evictions were fully and violently carried out, such as Dei Krahom community, or where community struggles and court cases have been protracted, such as Borei Keila, where the conflict has been ongoing for nearly a decade (Dey Krahom: Forced Eviction Purges Final Families, 2009; Sorn, 2021). The protracted struggle in Boeung Kak and subsequent qualified success of resistance set a precedent for subsequent evictions to be less violent and more equitable for communities. When residents were evicted from the White Building in 2017, community members were offered $1,200 per square meter, up to $70,000 total, compensation for an apartment (compared to $8,500 total compensation for a free-standing home in Boeung Kak) and additional government support for relocation which has not been a feature in any previous urban mass eviction in Phnom Penh (Meta, 2017; Rose-Jensen, 2017). One community member described Boeung Kak as an "80% success" because while many community members lost their homes, others received land titles and now own valuable property in the city center. Community members attributed this success to their continued activism, particularly the importance of solidarity and networking.

Methodology

For this research, I used ethnographic methods to conduct an in-depth case study in the two communities, Areng Valley and Boeung Kak. Data collection took place between 2015 and 2018, with follow-up data collected in both communities in 2021 and 2022. Primary data consists of in-depth ethnographic interviews with more than 130 community

members, CSO staff and volunteers, activists, and other members of the CSO network active against forced displacement in the two communities. Interviews were conducted in both English and Khmer. Interviews with CSO staff and volunteers were generally conducted in English or a mix of English and Khmer. With community members and some members of CSO networks, interviews were in Khmer with the assistance of a local research assistant/interpreter. While I speak conversational Khmer, working with a research assistant gave me better access to communities, helped to parse complex cultural issues, and facilitated my notetaking. Interviews were supplemented by participant observation in both communities and with CSOs in the network as well as document review of legal documents provided by CSOs, government statements, and NGO reports.

As both communities were engaged in protracted development-related conflicts and Boeung Kak, at least, had experienced an influx of journalists and researchers, there was some initial gatekeeping and hesitation to speak with yet another researcher. To overcome this gatekeeping, I worked first with well-known and formally recognized NGOs working on land, evictions, and related human rights issues to gain access to both informal CSOs and the communities in Boeung Kak and Areng Valley. In Areng, I worked closely with two youth organizations and the law firm that was handling the case for the community. I reached an arrangement with a family in Areng to live with them for one week each month for nearly one year. In Boeung Kak, I used the time-tested ethnographic method of "deep hanging out"; spending days in the community, patronizing local businesses, and speaking to anyone who would talk to me about their experience. I built a robust snowball sample in both communities from initial engagements. I also conducted interviews with more than 20 former Boeung Kak residents who had been relocated to the official relocation site in Borei Santipheap II, outside of Phnom Penh, and who had relocated themselves in Phnom Penh. In 2022 I conducted follow-up interviews with four community leaders still living in Boeung Kak to determine the current situation. In Areng, I interviewed community members in all three communes and in one village I conducted a door-to-door survey and interviewed at least one adult in each household. In 2021, I conducted follow-up interviews with six Areng residents. My choice to work so closely with community members limited my ability to interview local officials, who were moderately hostile to NGOs/CSOs and those perceived to be working with these organizations. Despite this, I was able to interview two village chiefs, one commune chief, and several members of the commune council in Areng. In Boeung Kak, local police observed several of my interviews with community members, but local officials did not respond to my written requests for interviews.

Because of the sensitivity of the research and because of low levels of formal literacy among many research participants, I used an oral consent process where I discussed the research, the data and identifying information I was collecting, the potential dangers, and implications with participants to gain their consent (I also had written consent forms in English and Khmer which were available to participants). I collected minimal identifying information from participants and ensured that community members' names were not recorded in the same documents as the data collected with them, in addition to other security measures such as password-protected files on my personal computer. I have

made an ethics and safety-based decision not to name any of the NGOs and CSOs involved in the research in my published works. While these organizations are working fully publicly, members of these organizations and networks have also been jailed, threatened, and even murdered (BBC, 2016; Mech, 2021; Titthara and Boyle, 2012). This also maintained the original research protocol, in which I informed participants that they would not be named and I would omit identifying information, including the names of organizations with which they were working. All names used throughout are pseudonyms.

Previous Understanding of the State

Early and sustained engagement with CSO networks, particularly small regional CSOs, appears to play a key role in resolving development-related conflicts in ways that communities consider successful (Dell'Angelo et al., 2021; Hall et al., 2015; Margulis and Porter, 2013; Ngin and Verkoren, 2015; Rose-Jensen, 2019; Swift, 2015; Weeber, 2016; Yeophantong, 2014). Through engagement with the CSO network, community members develop new understandings of development, development-related conflicts, and the role of the state. This leads some community members to develop a new sense of agency toward resolving development-related conflicts. This new sense of agency allows them to remain engaged in contestation despite high costs and barriers to social mobilization in Cambodia, and their long-term engagement in these conflicts appears to play a key role in securing better outcomes for their communities. In this section, I outline community members' prior understanding of the state and development and how this shifted through their engagement with the CSO network. In the following sections, I explore how CSOs fostered these new understandings and the effects on agency for community members. Before they engaged with the CSO network, community members had a relationship with some local officials who worked directly with the community, but their relationship with the state in a larger sense was limited and was paternalistic and top-down (Henke, 2011; Hughes, 2020; Hughes and Un, 2011a; Kim and Ojendal, 2011). Through their engagement with CSOs, particularly information sharing and networking with other communities also engaged in development-related conflicts, community members developed a new understanding of the role of the state and of their relationship to the state, in which community members had the agency to make demands on the state and expect the state to respond to those demands in some way.

Community members related that before they engaged with CSOs, they had a limited understanding of the role of the state, specifically the goods and services that the state might be expected to provide the population (see Kim and Ojendal, 2011 on the role of CSOs in informing communities on development issues in Cambodia). Mony, a youth activist from Areng, described his community's relationship to and understanding of the government:

> Authorities don't give value to the villagers - authorities think they are higher than the villagers. When the authorities prepare for meetings, villagers are not allowed to participate to know the process. I want to learn, but the authorities do not allow me to participate.

Because of community members' lack of knowledge, it was easy for the government authorities to ignore the needs and demands of community members and even abuse them. During a community meeting Vattanak, a youth activist from Areng, shared that the "Issue is that authorities threaten us and people lack knowledge, so it is easy to threaten them." One CSO leader working in Areng described the difference between Pro Laiy and Chum Noab communes, where CSOs were able to work closely with community members, and Tmol Don Pov, where the commune chief was hostile to CSOs and blocked most CSO activity. The people in Tmol Don Pov, the CSO leader shared, felt that the government was "their parent" and that they could not go against the government because of how they understood the relationship to the state.

Several women in Boeung Kak Lake used the powerful metaphor of having been "frogs in the lake" or well before the conflict in their community. Before the conflict in the community, community members had a limited view, like a frog (or a turtle, in some versions) in a lake or well, which can only see the boundaries of the container and the water around it. Community members were unaware of the larger context of development-related conflicts in Cambodia and regionally. After engagement with CSO networks and in the development-related conflict, community members developed new world views and new understandings, which allowed them to become "brave to stand up." Lina, who first explained the frogs metaphor to me said:

> When I went to protest, I was a new person. Proverb: people who do not go outside see like the frog in the lake. Before I was only a housewife - wash clothes, make food, take kids to school. Now I know a lot - government, authorities, human rights. Before I thought authorities were the father of the people. Before, I was really afraid of the police. Now I know they are not the parents, but are the ones who serve the people, they have salaries because of the people.

For Lina, going to protest and being educated through the CSO network about development conflicts and the role of the state was key to her development as "a new person." As with other community members interviewed, her statements indicate profound shifts in her thinking about development and her own agency, as a result of her engagement with the CSO network.

Others spoke more explicitly about their new understanding of development and the role of the state in development. Meng Neang, an older resident in Boeung Kak, discussed development in Cambodia generally, not just in her community, and said:

> I don't hate the government but [pause]. From when I worked at the port I saw the government had so much money, so many goods. Rice was being sent to Vietnam, but Cambodians didn't have enough to eat. Government builds bridges and roads and takes credit for them, but the money comes from other countries. There are beggars and crazy [mentally ill] people and the government doesn't take care of them. I want the government to build a hospital for them.

Working with CSOs helped her to understand the problems related to development not just in her community but in Cambodia in general. She learned that the government had a responsibility to the people and that she, as a citizen, could make demands on the state, rather than accept the status quo situation and what the state offered the people.

Research participants related that they had undergone shifts in how they understood the role of the state and the relationship of the state to the people, as a result of their engagement with CSO networks. I interviewed a group of five young people from Areng, three women and two men, including Chenda and Mony, who were in Phnom Penh on a study trip hosted by a youth NGO. All five agreed that they first became aware of the conflict when CSO network members, including volunteer activists with a small informal CSO as well as staff of a formal youth NGO, came to organize the community against the dam. I asked why and the group related that CSOs had educated and shared information. One of the young women, Chenda, said: "I wanted to know how many people in Cambodia were involved with social issues," which she was unaware of before involvement with CSOs. All five young people agreed that their understanding of the challenges facing their community changed when they began working with the CSO network, a clear demonstration of how their concepts of development evolved through experience with CSOs. In the next section, I explore the work of the CSO network that helped to develop these new understandings of the state.

Engagement with CSO Networks and Development of New Understanding of the State

In this section, I examine the actions and interventions of CSOs in these two communities and the effects of those interventions on contestation related to development in the communities. Information sharing and education, according to community members, were instrumental in getting people to initially engage with the conflict and join protests and contentious collective action (see Kim and Ojendal, 2011). In both Areng Valley and Boeung Kak, many community members related that they first learned of the planned development in the community and the possibility of resisting it from the staff of one of the small CSOs working closely with the communities. A shop owner in Boeung Kak who was threatened with eviction but ultimately not evicted told me that when she first heard of the planned development, she was very afraid. She wanted to speak to the authorities about the eviction but was afraid to do so. Other community members, she related, were also afraid. CSO staff and volunteers worked to educate her and other community members and she and others joined the protest movement in the community. In Areng Valley, because of the community's geographic isolation, lack of internet and mobile connectivity, and low formal education levels, many community members were even less aware than their urban counterparts. Mony, quoted above, said:

> I thought it wasn't important to join, because I thought other people had more knowledge and education. I didn't dare to talk to them. I thought that the people that came here to advocate

> [for the dam] might be supported by powerful people. I didn't dare talk to people from outside the community. I was afraid that if they asked me a question and I can't answer, I would feel embarrassed.

Mony's engagement with CSOs, particularly the two youth-led organizations discussed above, had given him a new understanding not just of development and development-related conflicts, but of his own agency in working to resolve those conflicts. Chenda, also from Areng, described how working with CSOs had helped her understand the state and the role of the government better. She said: "Sometimes I had questions in my mind, but I did not have answers.... I think I don't understand what the government thinks." This shifted for Chenda as she worked with a youth CSO to first educate herself, then her community about the dam and how and why the community should resist. In a later conversation, when I asked who or what was responsible for the problems in Areng, Chenda told me emphatically "It comes from the government. The government gives permission to the companies and the companies do it. The government does not care about it." Her statements demonstrate a clear shift from her earlier understanding of the role of the state. This shift kept Chenda engaged with the social movement in her community against the dam, despite the barriers to organizing in her community.

CSO staff and volunteers working with the communities reiterated the previous lack of knowledge and how this led to a lack of agency for community members, as well as how their organizations and others worked to build knowledge and agency in the communities. Sovanthy, a lawyer who had worked with the Areng community since early in the conflict told me that "At first, the community was afraid, planned to follow the government. They thought they had no right to say no." Now, she said, the community was "strong and brave to say to the government they don't need them [the government]." Sovanthy's statements demonstrate the importance of information sharing through the CSO network. This bravery to "stand up" to the government is a demonstration of the new agency community members developed that allowed them to contest against the government. As they contested and developed a new relationship to the state, the state also interacted with them differently and began to meet the needs of the communities as a result of the demands and protests coming from the communities. Bong Vuth, a commune chief in Areng, told me that:

> Before, it was very difficult. No help from the government until we went to protest. Only organizations like [redacted] helped us. Because we protested a lot, now the government build the schools and the hospital.

His statements demonstrate both the previous relationship to the state and the new sense of agency he developed through work with CSOs.

CSOs also support networking between communities and other communities engaged in development-related conflicts in Cambodia and regionally. Through this networking, community members developed new understandings that the issues facing their communities. Theavy, a leader in the Boeung Kak protests who went to prison for her activism

explained how networking helped her and other community members understand the development-related conflict and to start to act in their own interests:

> At first, I didn't know anything about the protests. I knew that in 1997 there were political protests. I joined those protests, but I didn't know anything about politics. Just as a supporter, to come and see. In 2008 the development project came and I knew the government gave land to the corporations. But I didn't know what to do, the whole community didn't know what to do. We asked questions. We knew we had to do something, so we started to gather and discuss. We didn't know what to do, just came together. We got training from NGOs, but the meetings started before that… So all the women know how to do advocacy because of the development. We didn't learn from the school, we learned from our suffering.

Networking with other communities in Cambodia also engaged in development-related conflicts has demonstrated to community members that the issues facing their communities are not isolated but are actually common, systemic problems facing many communities in Cambodia. Srey Mom, a Boeung Kak resident who traveled to Areng and Prey Lang as well as networking extensively with other urban communities in Phnom Penh said "A lot of communities have problems like Boeung Kak—all over Cambodia. More than 200 communities have problems with land, forests. We help each other because we have the same problems." Srey Mom was clear that the issues facing Boeung Kak were not isolated but were endemic through Cambodia and were issues that community members might hope to challenge.

Sva Sor, an activist from Phnom Penh who attended the Mekong School and subsequently volunteered in Areng and other communities resisting dam projects, organized several trips for community members to visit communities where dams had already been constructed. Meng Mao, an older woman in Areng who joined those trips, explained how learning about communities outside of Areng helped her to understand development-related conflicts and to find her agency to protest she said:

> Previously, I was very afraid of the authorities… But we have been educated about law and rights and are now brave to stand up. I changed. Now I dare to speak up for my rights because I learned a lot from people in other communities.

Her niece, Srey Lim, also highlighted the role of the same two youth organizations, which took her and other community members on trips to see other communities where dams had been built or where there was extensive deforestation. When she saw the impacts of dams and deforestation on those communities, she understood the potential impact on her community and began to join the protest and encourage other community and family members to do the same. She began writing letters and petitions to government officials about the dam and the rights of the community. Other community members corroborated that these study trips helped them develop a better understanding of the potential impacts of the dam and also of the relationship of their communities to the state. Bong S, the leader of one of the youth CSOs Srey Lim and others worked with,

explained the strategy to link Areng with other communities. Bong S said that if the government did support Areng, other communities would also make demands on the government. The problem, he said, was that other communities have not seen the success in Areng and so residents in those communities were not motivated to advocate for their communities. Thus, his organization was supporting networking to build a new understanding of development and of the government in Areng and to share this to other communities. These new understandings have allowed and encouraged community members to remain engaged in the protracted development-related conflicts and ultimately to secure better outcomes for their communities.

CSOs also supported networking between Areng and Boeung Kak residents, which built solidarity between the communities and also showed community members that urban and rural issues were related. Sothea, a farmer from Areng, learned about Boeung Kak and other urban forced evictions from the CSO network and educated other members of her family about land conflicts in Cambodia. Her husband, Ratana, said he was "afraid" Areng would end up like Boeung Kak and Borei Keila if they did not resist the dam successfully. A CSO leader had shown Sothea and Ratana photos of Boeung Kak protesters and Ratana compared their situation to Areng: "It's like Boeung Kak Lake. People have opinions about the [development] company, the company goes to attack them." Sokal, the leader of a housing rights organization that supported networking in urban communities and between urban and rural communities, including Areng and Boeung Kak, explained why his organization supported this work:

> Day to day, we see the cost of evictions, land grabbing, human rights abuse, use of courts to pressure activists. I see this is increasing nationwide. And the people behind these issues are in Phnom Penh. So, we have a strategy to link, to share stories, share issues. [My organization] can support this. The communities in the countryside know little, there is little training available to them. The more you don't know, the more you are scared. And there are few NGOs working in the countryside… So we want to bring them to the city to share and learn. It's a different context, but they can learn some things to apply in their community, knowing that they will be supported.

This networking supported by Sokal's organization and others helped community members to develop a sense of agency, discussed below.

New Agency for Change

Through engagement with CSO networks and as a result of developing new understandings of development-related conflict and of the role of the state, community members also developed a new sense of their own agency to resolve these conflicts and to make demands on the state. This enabled them to remain engaged in the development-related conflicts in their communities despite potentially high costs of activism and dissent in Cambodia (Henke, 2011; Hughes, 2020; Hughes and Un, 2011a; Kim and Ojendal, 2011). This long-term engagement and willingness to make demands on the state, according to community

members, CSO members, and my own observations, contributed to the eventual resolution of the conflicts in these communities and to better outcomes for Boeung Kak and Areng residents, relative to communities facing similar development-related conflicts (Dell'Angelo et al., 2021; Hall et al., 2015; Margulis and Porter, 2013; Ngin and Verkoren, 2015; Rose-Jensen, 2019; Swift, 2015; Weeber, 2016; Yeophantong, 2014).

Chenda explained to me how her understanding of the issues facing her Areng Valley community changed as she engaged with CSOs working in the community, explaining her new understanding of structural violence:

> Structural violence, yes! Example: when women are pregnant, they cannot go to the health center to give birth. Outsiders chastise them for not going to the health center, but they cannot, because the road is too difficult to pass and they have no money to pay the fees at the health center anyway. Another example is education. We are not too lazy to study, but there is no school for us! Some people from outside come to Areng and look down on us for this and ask why we are too lazy to study. I could not answer; I can only say that it's because there is no school. I didn't blame the government [before], because I did not know how to get a new school built. I only knew there was no school.

Later in the interview, I asked her about who was responsible, and Chenda was clear: "The government must respond to these problems… Local authorities are the first line, they have more responsibility for the villagers." Through her engagement with CSO networks, she developed a new, more comprehensive understanding of development-related conflicts and challenges being both the fault of the state and the state's responsibility to resolve those conflicts and to provide for communities, which led her to continue to protest despite challenges she faced. Mony related the shifts that took place for him as he worked with a youth NGO and in the movement against the dam. He described the shifts in his attitudes and behaviors before and after becoming involved with the CSO network:

> [Before] I didn't care about others, only myself. I was short-sighted. After I learned about the outside world – it's different from here. If they come to develop the people [here] would have a difficult life. In the past, I was like a *stiew* [hoodlum, thug, or mischief-maker]. Now I am a very thoughtful person. I know a lot about society. I also changed my way of living… I changed my character some. I think more about society. I am more brave to advocate.

Mony was communicating the growth of his own agency as a result of engaging with the CSO network working in his community. The training and support he received from CSOs developed his sense of agency related to rights and development, enabling him to advocate for his community.

Thy, a youth activist from Areng, described new agency that had developed in the community as being "trains" or engines started by civil society. He said that the first "train" began when two CSOs began working in the community to educate people on the negative impacts of the dam and the need to resist. The second "train" started

when the dam project was postponed and CSOs began working to organize ecotourism projects in the community. Thy said the authorities, the police and the government, had tried to stop both trains. The authorities tried to slow the action of the first train by arresting community members and discouraging them. In the case of the second train, more people had been joining and the train had been gaining momentum. These "trains," or the willingness and ability of community members to engage in protracted resistance and conflict, certainly contributed to the suspension or cancellation of the Areng dam project (Narim, 2017; Peter, 2017; Ratana, 2015). A staff member at an umbrella human rights organization that supports communities engaged in human rights struggles throughout Cambodia explained these new understandings as a "new trend" in "understanding about common problems in the community." These new understandings, developed through networking and engagement with CSO networks, enabled community members to develop a new sense of agency regarding the conflicts they are engaged in. This, then, allowed people to remain engaged in the conflict despite barriers and costs and to continue to demand solutions that they perceive as more equitable.

Residents of both communities attributed the successful or semi-successful resolution of development-related conflicts to people's new understandings of development and the role of the state, as well as the agency from the communities to make demands on the state once they were educated about their rights. Sothea, quoted above, said that her community first learned about the dam, but only the potential benefits, from the government. CSOs, especially the two youth organizations mentioned throughout, educated the community on the potential negative impacts. She said:

> Officials of the government asked us to allow Hun Sen to build the dam. Wanted to know who approved or not. Government asked why we did not want to move, because there would be enough water, electricity, everything in other places [relocation site]. But people say they don't believe the government, because they do not see it and the government only tells them.

Her neighbor emphasized the role of CSO bluntly: "In 2014 or 2015, the organizations came and the result is that government promised to stop the dam." In Boeung Kak, Lina estimated that "98% who go to protest have land title now." Her estimation of success rates is overly high, but her point was clear: protest, supported by CSOs, led to better outcomes. I asked what made Boeung Kak residents successful and she said "Because we work with each other. My team works together, we try for all, not just one. When we go to protest some go to prison, but we do not go away, we protest more. We love each other." Community members were clear that new understandings and new agency led them to continue to contest against development and that continued contestation led to their success.

Conclusion

As development conflicts are increasingly common in Southeast Asia and other developing regions of the globe, it is imperative to understand these conflicts and how they can be

resolved. As noted, resolutions tend to be top-down and biased against communities. Engagement with civil society networks is one consistent factor in resolving development-related conflicts in ways that are more equitable for communities. This research indicates that through engagement with civil society networks, community members have developed new understandings of development, the role of the state, and their own agency in seeking resolutions to these conflicts as well as to develop community members' sense of agency. Community members developed a future-oriented focus and began to emphasize the need for development that would support the community and their families for generations, not just immediate solutions to challenges. The wife of a village chief in Areng said "I'm not afraid for myself. I'm afraid for the future generations. We have to think for the future generations. We can't destroy everything." Her statements demonstrate her newly developed agency related to resolving her community's development-related challenges as well as her new understanding of development generally. Together, these new understandings of development and willingness to engage in conflict over the long-term have, in these two instances, resulted in better outcomes for community members.

In Areng, the dam project was put on hold indefinitely, the first instance of community resistance causing a dam project to be canceled. Today, as a result of improvements to the road into Areng, community members are clearing new land to plant cash crops, primarily bananas, in addition to subsistence farming. The community has an ecotourism project which provides income for many families, in addition to continued out-migration of young people to work in other provinces, which is providing funds for community members to improve their homes and buy more land. The community still lacks secure land tenure, however, Areng residents who I spoke to are hopeful that development may be supporting community needs. In Boeung Kak, more than 1,000 households successfully fought eviction and more than 600 now hold land titles for valuable homes in the city center. People speak in Phnom Penh about the "former Boeung Kak" area or community. In 2022, while significantly smaller, the neighborhood remains a vibrant community struggling to continue to exist in the center of a growing city. Many tourist-oriented businesses have closed, however, more small businesses oriented toward the local community—car and motorbike repair, small coffee shops and food stalls—have opened. The outcome of community resistance influenced how later evictions in Phnom Penh were conducted, with more equitable treatment of residents. Thus, the research indicates that early and sustained engagement with CSO networks, particularly smaller, local and regional CSOs, may help to provide more equitable outcomes for communities engaged in development-related conflicts in Southeast Asia.

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