

STUDY RATIONALE

The personal and social impacts, both long and short term, of child abuse and exploitation is increasingly being understood; however, child protection and the fulfillment of child rights are far from being achieved in Cambodia. While protecting children from harm and abuse is a shared responsibility with many actors, primary caregivers and the state hold a special responsibility as duty bearers for a child's health, safety and protection. In Cambodia, the primary institution through which these duty bearers interact at the local (Commune and Sangkat) level is the Commune Committees for Women and Children (CCWCs), which were established nationwide in 2004 as part of the nation's decentralization and deconcentration process. While substantial research regarding local governance structures (such as Commune Councils) exists, there has been very little research on CCWCs, and how they interact with informal child protection groups and systems.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted primarily through qualitative methods using key informant interviews and focus group discussions with government actors, citizens and NGO staff at local and national levels; in addition to a review of project reports. After receiving

endorsement from National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development (NCDD), primary data collection was commenced from October to December 2015 in 32 communes/Sangkat across 10 provinces and Phnom Penh.



10 provinces and Phnom Penh covering 32 Communes/Sangkat

10 provinces include **Battambang, Banteay Meanchey, Tboung Khmum, Kampong Chhnang, Kratie, Prey Veng, Preah Sihanouk, Siem Reap, Svay Rieng, Takeo**

This study aimed to contribute to learning and improvement of the child protection system in Cambodia by providing further insight into the functioning of CCWCs, their partnerships with NGOs, interactions with informal child protection mechanisms at the village level, factors which promote or hinder CCWC success, and the attitudes and behaviors they hold towards children and child protection. The study has involved 14 programs across 5 organisations (World Vision, ChildFund, Save the Children, Plan and UNICEF) that provide system strengthening for child protection in Cambodia. These organisations were responsible for the design of the research objectives, identification of research participants, and input on initial drafts of the study with the goal that it will be useful to on-going child protection programs.



ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Care was taken to ensure respondents were protected from harm. Specifically, the research made conscious efforts to:

1. Ensure informed, voluntary consent was given by all participants;
2. Follow the child protection code of conduct in The Right to be Properly Researched, Knowing Children (2012) and ensure the research was conducted in a child sensitive manner;
3. Follow guidelines to prevent participant distress;
4. Ensure research was conducted in a gender sensitive manner;
5. Ensure protection of both data collection forms to protect confidentiality and rights of participants.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The study found that most CCWCs surveyed were minimally functional, but that they have begun moving beyond their mandate as a coordination and referral mechanism, towards taking responsibility for delivering child protection services themselves. However, due to CCWCs' limited technical capacity,

these services were often inadequate, which could potentially result in placing children at continued risk.

The findings have been organised into three themes below.

I. FUNCTIONALITY OF THE CCWCs

The study explored what CCWCs considered to be their core roles, which resulted in nine activities being commonly identified in response to focus group discussion question, and then recon-

firmed in interviews. The activities are presented in Table 1, ranked in three levels of reporting frequency.

CCWC's reported core responsibilities

| Most commonly given | Second most commonly given | Third most commonly given |
|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing health support to pregnant women | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collecting information regarding vulnerable women and children • Helping to find solutions for domestic violence • Supporting/encouraging children to attend school • Awareness raising regarding safe migration. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing nutrition and hygiene information • Training youth groups • Solving problems of vulnerable mothers and children • Preventing sexual abuse |

This revealed two important perceptions that CCWCs have about their responsibilities:

1. That they should be focused on child protection needs of communities, with 5/9 actions directly related to child protection (helping to find solutions for domestic violence; solving problems of vulnerable mothers and children; preventing sexual abuse; awareness raising regarding safe migration, and prevention of trafficking, child labor, and gender discrimination; gathering information regarding vulnerable women and children).
 2. That they have expanded beyond coordination, awareness raising and monitoring to include implementation of service delivery (providing health support to pregnant women; helping to find solutions for domestic violence; supporting/encouraging children to attend school; training youth groups on a wide variety of subjects and solving problems of vulnerable mothers and children).
- Support was commonly provided to families affected by domestic violence; however, CCWCs often favored reconciliation over prosecution (a practice not endorsed by most NGOs as it does not act as a deterrent for perpetrators and places victim at risk of future violence).
 - Support of children affected by sexual abuse was reported by many CCWC members who strongly supported arrest and prosecution of perpetrators. However, "sexual abuse" was often limited to rape cases, possibly because a lack of knowledge regarding other forms of abuse.
 - Prevention of migration, and support to children left behind by migration, was mostly addressed through CCWCs conducting awareness raising activities to encourage children to delay migration or to migrate more safely.

In addition to this, the CCWC members identified common services or activities that they determined to be effective for protecting children.

- Prevention of school drop out and child labor was a common intervention that was considered to be most effective. It was expressed as a need from the community, and was also considered "easy" for CCWCs to deliver.

II. ATTITUDE AND BEHAVIORS TOWARDS CHILDREN

While Functioning of the Commune Committees on Women and Children (FCG) pocket guide (RGC, 2008) notes that CCWCs are tasked with advocating for women to participate in decision-making relating to the development of the CS, it does not mention advocating for participation of children. In many

cases CCWCs did involve children but this involvement did not appear to meaningfully engage children.

Different views from child and adult (government actor) are evident below:

“
— A CHILD —

Green says that children don't know a lot, children are young and still need to study, but although children are young, they do know a lot but grown ups refuse to listen.

— CCWC LEADER —

Children come to our events and we advise them on how to walk the good path.

— OTHER CCWC MEMBER —

We invite children, we give children a chance but they don't talk much because they are too shy.

”

III. FACTORS HINDERING OR PROMOTING EFFECTIVENESS

Factors hindering effectiveness include:

1. **A complex accountability structure**
CCWCs members report to several Ministries, which undermines the commitment of members from the police, health center, school, and to a lesser degree Commune Council. Members often view involvement in CCWC as an additional duty, and are not invested in promoting child protection.
2. **Lack of funding to cover operational cost and provision of services**
CCWCs were insufficiently funded to complete basic functions, and the member tasks were assigned to people who already have other positions and responsibilities.
3. **Lack of a national network of social services delivery**
Cambodia does not have a national government social services network to provide social work services and NGOs are often the main social service providers at the CS and village level. CCWCs often rely on collaborations with NGOs to link families with services which appeared to be influenced by agenda of donors and NGOs at national and international level, rather than inputs from CCWCs.
4. **Lack of technical capacity in preventing and responding to child protection issues**
CCWC members had sufficient capacity to identify abuse case, but insufficient skill to know how to appropriately respond. This limited technical capacity results in inadequate response to child protection cases. Of particular concern are:
 - Reconciliation of cases of domestic abuse that places victims at continued risk,
 - Lack of capacity to identify sexual abuse other than rape,
 - Use of shelters as the primary treatment option for children who have been raped, and
 - An over reliance on referring cases to residential care institutions (RCIs).

5. **Lack of attendance and participation of citizens in CCWCs**
CCWCs are not well known amongst the general population; few children knew about CCWCs. Meetings are not well attended, or not attended by the target groups. Children in particular were unlikely to share their views at meetings.

Factors enhancing effectiveness include:

1. **Strong leadership and active involvement of focal person**
CCWC focal points are the only members for whom the CCWC is their main duty; they felt a strong responsible for implementing activities.
2. **Establishment and strong engagement of children, parents and youth groups with CCWCs**
The involvement of citizens can lead to increased reporting of child abuse to authorities, and can positively impact CCWC functioning by:
 - Building the knowledge base of members, so that they were more able to engage and respond to issues,
 - Improving communication skills of both members and citizens; and to preparing them for active participation in CCWC meetings,
 - Establishing clearer links between group informal members and local authorities.
3. **Provision of social workers**
Social workers worked closely with CCWCs, receiving ongoing referrals. They were able to provide therapeutic services within the community, which provided an alternative to other CCWC common responses of reconciliation (in cases of domestic violence) or reliance on RCIs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to the findings of this study, the following changes are recommended:

Funding & Resources

Key findings:

- Child protection services at the village level are underfunded, with no dedicated funding from MoSVY and insufficient funds for CCWCs.
- Commune budgets tend to favor infrastructure projects over social services, and the process to use funds for social services is more complex than other sectors and projects. This may reflect a lack of knowledge on potential services that could be funded by local Commune budgets.
- When NGOs support planning and budgeting processes, the result is increased allocation of the CIP to social services.

Recommendations for government:

- MoSVY should adopt clearer strategies to establish a comprehensive social service delivery system that will increase child protection social services at village and commune levels in the long term, and develop a clear funding request to the Royal Government of Cambodia for adequate budget to implement the system.
- As part of this strategy, funds to CCWC through Mol should be increased with a greater focus on prevention activities, data collection, costs for home visits and responding to cases of child and domestic abuse.
- The Commune process for requesting and receiving funds for social services should be reviewed and simplified.
- CCWCs should educate citizens on social services that can be funded through the CIP.

Recommendations for NGOs, civil society and other partners:

- NGOs should continue to support CCWCs to fulfill their mandated roles according to government policy, including supporting child protection services at the local level, and provide inputs into the development of a national system for social services.
- NGOs should continue to expand support for CCWC and Commune Councils in planning and budgeting processes, and advocate for increased allocation of budgets to social services (at Commune, District and Provincial level).
- NGOs should support citizen participation in influencing and monitoring Commune budgets.

Activities and responsibilities (Programs)

Key findings:

- Many CCWCs had moved beyond their role described in policy, and were providing child protection services. These services were often inadequate which could potentially place children at continued risk.
- CCWCs' limited technical capacity results in inadequate response to child protection cases. For example, an overreliance on reconciliation of cases places victims at continued risk, sexual abuse cases other than rape were not always identified; an over reliance on shelters and residential care institutions as the primary response for children who have been raped.
- The involvement of local civil society groups, specifically parent and children's groups, can lead to increased reporting of child abuse to authorities, and can positively impact CCWC functioning.
- NGOs were often the main providers of child protection services, but these programs were often decided at national level with limited input from CCWCs and do not cover the whole population.
- A lack of faith in the justice system hampered efforts to prosecute abusers, and the justice system is not child friendly, confidential or affordable.
- Informal kinship care is an intrinsic part of community-based child protection.
- An NGO program supporting social workers who received referrals from CCWCs was effective and successful.

Recommendations for government:

- Mol should review and amend the roles of CCWCs to bring greater clarity to their responsibilities, including their monitoring function, and the involvement of children, women, social workers and religious leaders in the committee.

Recommendations for government:

- The monitoring function of CCWCs should be further strengthened, supporting CCWCs to use information collected to link with NGO services and ensure coordination of services with local providers.
- Further focus and guidelines on child and youth engagement and participation in CCWCs are required, and ensure their involvement aligns with their best interests.
- CCWCs should promote community based care and prevent unnecessary placement of children in residential care.
- Mol should collaborate with MoSVY to provide further capacity building to CCWCs on:
 - Budgeting for child protection issues.
 - Identification and monitoring of vulnerable children,
 - Ensuring the safety of children when responding to domestic violence or sexual abuse cases,
 - The benefits of linking to community based care programs and the negative impact of residential care on child development.
 - Referral processes to services (either government or NGO).
- Strengthen the implementation of domestic violence laws to ensure prosecution (and incarceration) of offenders and enhance support for victims.
- Reinforce existing laws with Commune Councilors, CCWC members and Police to ensure citizens are not required to pay informal fees to try cases and ensure the justice system provides confidentiality and access for children.

Recommendations for NGOs, civil society and other partners:

- In the medium term, NGOs should expand programs providing social workers/services (for victims and vulnerable children and families) that CCWCs can refer to, and support the strengthening of coordination mechanisms between the CCWCs and service providers (including identifying geographic gaps in service provision).
- Further advocate for the allocation of local Commune budgets for social workers.
- Strengthen staff knowledge and understanding of the CCWC roles (as outlined in policy) and ensure partnerships support the CCWCs capacity to identify and refer child protection cases.
- Further support government efforts to reduce residential care by mapping options for community based care and explicitly link new opportunities with CCWCs.
- Support programs and mechanisms that provide opportunities for citizens to express needs to CCWCs, and influence decision making regarding child protection services at the local level.
- Collaborate with sub-national governments at District and Provincial level to ensure referrals and networks between NGOs and CCWCs are well coordinated.
- Continue to evaluate, research and explore opportunities for kinship care in Cambodia and develop viable models.

Administrative structure and accountability

Key findings:

- CCWC members have confusing reporting lines to different Ministries which undermines focus and commitment of members (from the police, health center, school, and to a lesser degree Commune Council).
- WCCCs do not appear to engage with or support CCWCs in a substantive manner.

Recommendations for government:

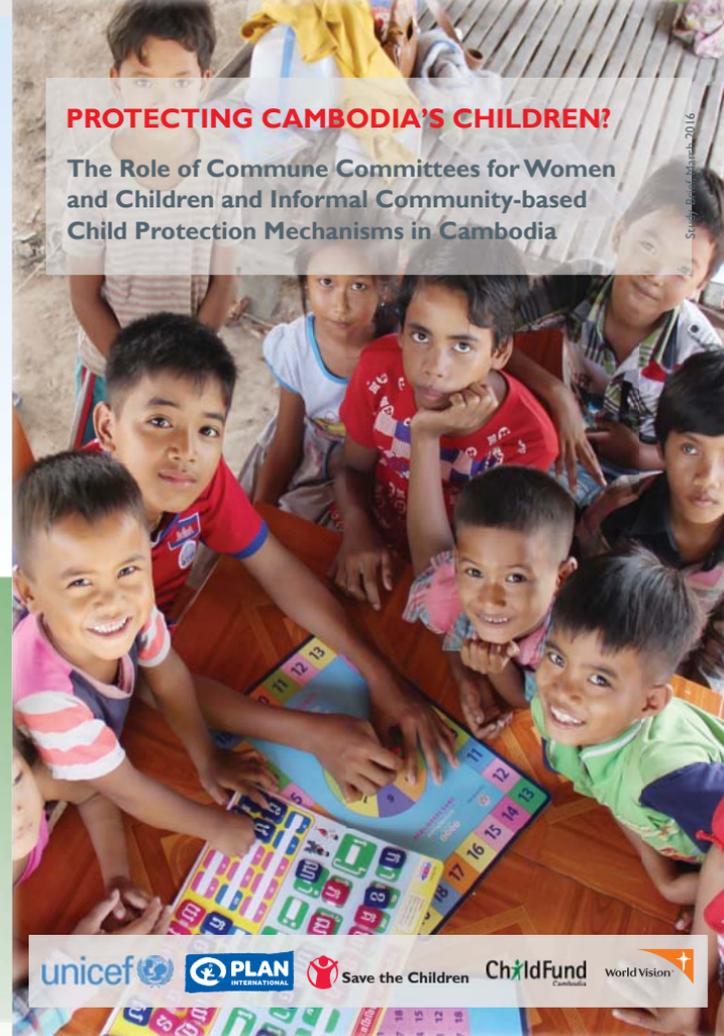
- Mol must clarify the roles and responsibilities of the members of CCWCs and build accountability mechanisms. New standards (that can be monitored) should be clearly established in policy. The new standards should also detail the roles, responsibilities, and participation of police, health centers, schools, Commune Councilors, and other government actors.
- Responsibilities for information sharing (such as police sharing information on child abuse cases reported) should be made more clear, and ensure other CCWC members are responsive to their role when information is shared with them.
- Mol should clarify how WCCCs can coordinate and better support CCWCs to fulfill their mandate for child protection, this will require amendments to existing Prakas or new policies, to detail the timing of interactions, monitoring and accountability mechanisms, and responsiveness of WCCCs to the issues raised through CCWCs for further support.

Recommendations for NGOs, civil society and other partners:

- NGOs should ensure their programs support the diverse make up of CCWCs and maximize the link to other sectors.

PROTECTING CAMBODIA'S CHILDREN?

The Role of Commune Committees for Women and Children and Informal Community-based Child Protection Mechanisms in Cambodia



Source: Buijs, 2016