

Workshop Results

“Promoting youth democratic citizenship and participation in Cambodian elections”

Fact Findings, Achievements, Challenges, and Recommendations

I. Background of the workshop

In 2010, UNDP has published a Baseline Study on Youth Civic Participation in Cambodia: Knowledge, Attitude, Practices and Media. The key findings in this research were that there still is a lack of awareness and knowledge of Democratic Concepts and Institutions under the Cambodian Youth. Under 2000 youth respondents (average age 19) from five regions from different social strata and diverse education background nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the respondents could not say what democracy means to them. Those who expressed their ideas on democracy neither elections nor voting were mentioned.

The study found that 54 per cent of respondents who were eligible in the 2007 Commune Council elections did not actually vote and that 21 per cent of the first time eligible voters were not registered at all.

Cambodia will implement communal elections in July 2012. Young voters present an increasing fraction of total eligible voters and their vote plays a key role for the selection of future leaders. Political Parties, Youth Associations, NGO's and Media have a core responsibility to inform, encourage and mobilise young voters to participate in election and to help answer the question of “Why voting is important and what is the link between youth voter registration, youth voter turnout and long term democratic development and good governance.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) in cooperation with Buddhism for Development (BfD) have long experience in promoting democratic concepts and values for the Cambodian Youth. Their joint workshop aims at assessing the current situation and reasons of low youth participation in elections in Cambodia as well as the role political parties and media currently play and would need to play in the future to promote democratic citizenship and youth participation in elections.

II. General Findings

"General Findings on Cambodian Youth ("General Findings of the Study on Cambodian Youth of BBC World Trust sample 2000 young Cambodians 15-24)"

- a. 70% of Cambodians are under 30 years of age
- b. Cambodian youth is rural youth: Poverty is a daily reality
- c. Only 1,4 % of Cambodians in the age group of between 15-24 are enrolled in university (elite minority)

Overall knowledge on key concepts of democracy and human rights, functions and responsibilities of political institutions and political involvement is limited

- 72 % had heard the term democracy, but 72 % of the 72 % were not able to explain the term
- 92 % had heard the term commune council but 30% didn't know about the role and function of a Commune Council
- 25 % of the interviewed had never heard of the word parliament, 62% of the 75 % who had heard the term didn't know what a parliament does
- 40% of the interviewees did never talk to anyone about political issues
- 5 % had been active in a political organisations, 14% in a local youth organisations

Attitudes and Perceptions of Politics

- many young citizens would like to involve and participate more actively but had negative connotations and perception about politics
- majority of young citizens is occupied to support the family through manual labour, politics is regarded as an adult domain
- Young people's major concerns are related to become a victim of youth violence or being hit by traffic accidents

Youth and Media

- 93 % of young Cambodians have access to mobile phones
- 60 % listen regularly to the radio
- 77% have access to TV
- 6% read a newspaper or magazine
- 7% had ever used the internet

III. Achievements, Challenges, and Recommendations

1) Government Youth participation in voter registration and election

- decreasing number of people complain on voter registration process and irregularities
- Overall Rate of registration has increased, 9,2 million citizens are registered
- Youth registration (18-30 years) for communal elections has increased by 1.6% compared to the 2007 communal elections

- Ministry of Interior (MoI) is currently preparing the provision of 2 million new ID Cards for first time voters
- To enable voter participation in elections MOI extended the validity of 5 million expired ID cards for two years
- Due to the flooding, voter registration process for communal elections has been prolonged up to 30 days
- National Youth policy has been adopted to increase youth capacity and the development of youth in the preparation and implementation of the commune development plans

Challenges of the government to improve voter registration

- Need for medium and long term set up of an nation-wide IT system managed with accurate information/statistics on population figures, migration (registration and giving notice of departure) figures, effective birth registration for issuing ID Cards to increase accurate information on local population
- Effective Monitoring on the movement of citizens (movable work force) remains a challenge, current available information on migration flows and figures are non-reliable, many voters are registered in two places (old, new work place)
- 2.000.000 million young citizens will reach the voting age in 2012, government tries to issue new ID Cards for those but lacks the equipment to issue them in time
- Participation of Youth in elections remains very low, Government has no special program to promote Voter Registration, those programs are implemented by local/international NGO's
- Overall knowledge on the importance of elections as well as youth participation is low
- Voter registration's responsibility lies with the commune councils, name lists are drafted manually and very often include spelling mistakes or redundancy of names when the data is digitally entered by NEC nationally
- No government funds are provided to monitor the accurateness of voting lists
- Information on the newly provided registration form "1018" is not sufficient and Commune Councils complain about the complexity of the form

2) Role of Political Parties and Media to promote Youth participation in Politics and Voter Registration

a) Political Parties

All parties highlight the relevance and importance of youth and the impact youth can have on the election results. All parties have youth structures in place and try to encourage youth to become activists and involve in elections and politics. All youth representatives highlighted their commitment to use their local structures to organise trainings in districts/ commune's/Sangkats to inform youth about the relevance of elections. All parties highlighted again the still limited percentage of Youth participation in elections (52% in Communal elections in 2007).

b) Media Challenges

- TV and radio have great potentials but the overall TV/radio programmes do not cover extensively social or political issues providing information and giving platforms for youth exchange

- No real culture of balanced and quality debate around issues (often politicised)
- Youth has no real platform on TV/radio to engage with politicians and experts on issues of youth concern
- Internet and social Media, if rightly used, can attract youth and become an important tool for dissemination on youth issues, nevertheless currently only 7% of Cambodians between 18-30 years have access to internet
- Radio, TV mostly provide only one way communication, user is passive, receives information but does not activate his knowledge, ideas
- Apathy towards politics of the younger generation can be seen as an institutional problem as well as an individual problem, media can provide tools and opportunities for youth civic and political participation, but young citizens also need to learn through families, school, peer groups the relevance and importance for civic/political participation to be attracted by and getting involved in those programmes

Recommendations

- Media campaigns need to find ways and tools to attract the younger generation
- Create spaces for two way communications for youth, new media have a great potential for allowing young citizens to become involved through blogging, reacting to news, political developments
- Activation and debate leads to increased self-esteem, confidence, courage to articulate positions in public and to promote convictions and positions
- Radio and TV have to be creative to allow young citizens to express regularly their opinions in their programmes
- More platform for discussions and intergenerational debate which engage younger generation needs to be generated
- Online Media need to explore new ways/form of e-participation of young people to attract young voters and citizens (through online voting, online campaigning, online debates etc.)

c) Youth Challenges

- Youth remains disengaged and reluctant to involve in politics (negative connotations and perceptions of politics); Citizens/Youth do not trust in the political system, politics is seen as something to not get involved
- Generation challenge: Older generation often reluctant to allow youth to speak up, raise their voice and get involved
- Youth is occupied with looking for personal economic well-being and improved living conditions, little interest in civic participation as the benefit is not directly tangible
- Little understanding of youth at local level about the benefits of multiparty democracy and the role of political parties to promote democratic development
- No clear youth policies/programmes have been identified and developed by the parties or parties youth wings to attract young citizens to one party
- Party structures do not allow independent youth wings with own organisational structures, policies, programmes and ideas to engage with and challenge the mother party
- Different engagement of political parties to promote youth within the party (to promote young candidates to run for elections)
- Local Structures of parties dominated by CPP, difficult for opposition parties to reach out to youth to engage them in a dialogue during campaign – unequal access to financial, organisational and human resources between the parties

Recommendations

- Promote civic and political education in primary, secondary and university education to lay the basis for political and civic awareness
- Knowledge on the role, responsibilities and functions of political parties in democratic systems need to be integrated in curricula of civic education
- Political Parties need to strengthen (to a different degree) inner party democracy, transparency and financial accountability to gain voter legitimacy
- Political parties need to become attractive and need to explore new channels of communications to attract young citizens and convince them to get engaged and defend political concepts and ideas
- Develop strong independent youth wings who promote variety of opinions and policies and who advocate within the party youth policies

IV. Overall Recommendations

- Families, schools, universities, parties, youth organisations, governments, peer groups, NGO's, Media and youth themselves all have a role to play to enable young citizens to become involved in civic and political life
- Adequate space for debate, discussion, expression of opinion for younger generation on issues of direct concern shall be provided by all social and professional entities
- Each actor/entity needs to assess its own policy/activities and methods to promote youth civic/social and political participation and develop their own ways of active and constructive and innovative engagement with youth
- New forms of communication responding to new patterns of the use of media and telecommunication needs to be identified to reach out to young citizens (information about elections through mobile phone, e-campaigning, etc.)
- Further strengthening the Dialogue/consultation mechanism of the Government with youth representatives and the co-management of national youth programmes
- Create more spaces for active democratic citizenship (in schools, universities, local governments, families etc.) where youth can be involved in representative structures, to personally experience democratic duties and responsibilities