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Research Policy Networks in Cambodia: Agents of Change?

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Abstract

This short paper looks at four research policy networks in Cambodia though the eyes of a function-form approach developed by the Overseas Development Institute to study and support networks. It uses the Cambodia cases to draw tentative conclusions about the relations between the structural characteristics of networks and the roles and functions they carryout. The paper concludes that while networks can carryout various functions simultaneously, structural differences mean that some are able to specialise on and develop some functions more than others. It also addresses the effects of the external environment on network, in particular, local aspects of interpersonal relationships (namely, trust) and how that may affect the fulfilment of the networks' functions. Finally, the paper considers the usefulness of the framework to improve our understanding of networks and how they work.

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Introduction

The Overseas Development Institute's (ODI) Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) group is undertaking a long-term study on research policy networks and their roles in linking research and policy. A literature review, a series of background papers on the subject and the development of a framework to better understand and work with research policy networks have been completed. Evidence from these studies shows that networks play a key role in bridging research and policy.

ODI's networks research has as its main objective to provide networks with the necessary knowledge to tackle internal and external challenges better and improve their capacity to use research-based evidence to influence policy processes in their own contexts. It is not the objective of this paper, or of the case studies, to provide an evaluation of the networks. We make the assumption that networks are relevant and necessary if they fulfil a function for which there is a demand (Mendizabal 2006). Hence, although we make some references to the network's successes in influencing policy in their respective sectors, these are not intended as an evaluation of these efforts. As such, we hope that the lessons from these four cases from Cambodia will provide civil society there and elsewhere with insights into how networks work and what can they do to work better.

This synthesis paper is structured in the following way: first, we describe the methodology used in each case study. Then we provide a short assessment of the context faced by civil society in Cambodia, and networks in particular. In the next section we present a brief background of the cases, highlighting the functions they play. Finally, we offer some practical recommendations from these findings.

Some background on the methodology

ODI, as part of its RAPID group,[1] has begun a long-term study into the linkages between research and policy. Within it, it addresses the roles that networks can play to make these links more likely. In Emily Perkin and Julius Court's (2005) literature review of networks and policy processes in development, many of the key emerging themes surrounding the subject were discussed. Perkin and Court show that networks can be useful as communicators or bridges between research, practice and policy. They found that networks can help researchers influence policy processes in several ways. This usefulness hints at the functions that networks can play.

The attention to functions is important for many reasons (Mendizabal, 2006). Among them, as in any organisation, what a network does is related to how it is structured. Changing one without changing the other might lead to negative impacts on the networks and their objectives. Also, introducing new functions to certain networks might be counterproductive to the achievement of the network's original objectives and those who depend on them. These are very relevant issues for research policy

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[1] For more information on this subject go to www.odi.org.uk/rapid/projects/ppa0103 or Mendizabal (2006).

networks in the development field – in particular as they reform to better influence policy.

Also, traditional definitions of networks do not necessarily respond to the vast diversity that exists. These make assumptions about what different types of networks should be like rather than embrace their difference. A functional description could incorporate a much broader number of research policy networks, which carry out very different functions and roles and are organised in many different ways, to achieve the same objective evidence-based policy influence.

Roles

Among research policy networks there are many fundamental differences. While some networks are, in fact, key agents of change, others merely provide their members with the necessary support they need to pursue their own research policy strategies. So it is probably easier to think of the previously mentioned networks' functions within two overarching roles: Agency and Support (Mendizabal 2006).

The Agency role denotes a network that is charged by its members to become the main agent of the change they aim to achieve. Hence as in the diagram to the right, resources (funding, skills, staff, knowledge, connections, etc.) flow from the members to the Secretariat. Members may also carry out their own policy influence work, but on some key issues they have entrusted the network to represent them.
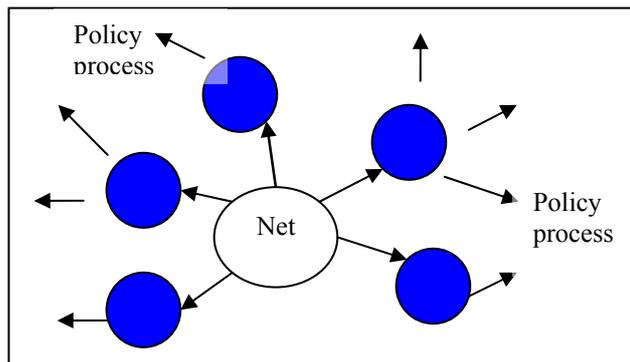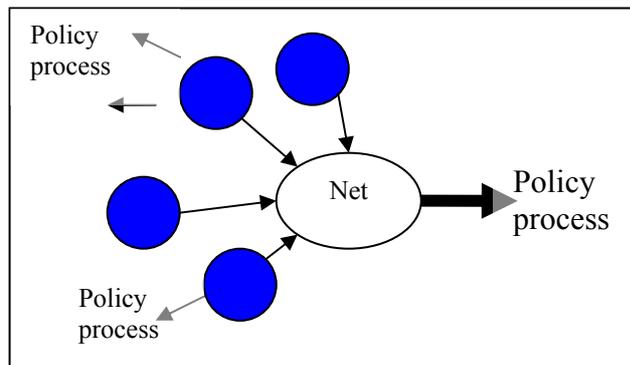
The Support role, on the other hand, works on the opposite direction. In this case, the network itself (as an independent entity or the Secretariat) is not the agent of change but supports its members by providing them with the necessary resources to influence policy and practice.

In practice, most research policy networks have some characteristics of both. Nonetheless, it is important to consider how important these roles are for the network and its members as it constitutes their raison d'être.

Functions

It is within these roles that networks can fulfil six, non-exclusive functions (Portes and Yeo, 2001; Yeo, 2004; Yeo and Mendizabal, 2004):

- Filtering: To 'decide' what information is worth paying attention to and to organise unmanageable amounts of information.
- Amplify: To help take little known or little understood ideas and make them more widely understood.
- Invest/Provide: To offer a means to give members the resources they need to carry out their main activities.
- Convene: To bring together different people or groups of people.
- Community building: To promote and sustain the values and standards of the individuals or organisations within them.
- Facilitate: To help members carry out their own activities more effectively.

These functions describe the specific set of activities that networks undertake and, therefore, provide a detailed account of their objectives and the manner in which they aim to achieve them. It would be expected that agency networks would dedicate more resources towards outward-looking functions such as amplifying and convening; support networks would emphasise community building, investing and facilitating.

It is important to remember that the assumption we make is that networks are necessary as long as they fulfil functions for which there is a demand. This might very well mean that they dedicate all their efforts to community building functions and none to amplifying or facilitating policy influence. There are many roles for many networks and we do not think that they should all focus on one or another.

The form of networks

Having defined the functions that networks can play, the next step is to determine the structural characteristics (organisation, skills, resources, etc.) that networks need to have to be able to fulfil them. For instance, what type of membership does a network need to be a successful amplifier? Is it the same as the membership needed for community building? Based on a broad review of the literature and a series of case studies, we suggest the following criteria to understand the structure of networks (Mendizabal, forthcoming).

- Localisation and scope: Where are the network and its members located, both physically and thematically?
- Membership: Who are the network's members and how are they related to each other?
- Governance: What are the behaviours and processes in place within the network that govern its short and long-term functioning?
- Resources: Does the network have access to all the inputs necessary for its functioning?
- Capacity and skill: Do the network and the network members have the capacity and skills necessary to carry out their functions and tasks?
- Communications: Does the network have appropriate communication strategies to carry out its functions, thus amplifying messages outwardly or sharing messages and information within the institution?
- Strategic and adaptive capacity: Is the network capable of managing changes and shocks in both its internal and external environment? Can it manage those changes on its own or does it depend on others (partners, networks, donors)?

- External environment: What are the external influences affecting the network?

These criteria cover both the internal and external environment of the network and consider the structures and process that allow it to function and develop. Some of them are also stressed by more than one. In essence, they provide a guide drawn from the literature and the understanding that the external and internal environment and the network's content matter equally when addressing success on policy impact.

Describing networks

A description of a network using the function-form approach would consider first its role, i.e. whether it is a support or agency network (or what proportion of each it follows). Within this, one would then consider the various functions the network carries out. With this information, it would be easier to understand how these networks are structured to influence policy using research-based evidence.

Describing networks
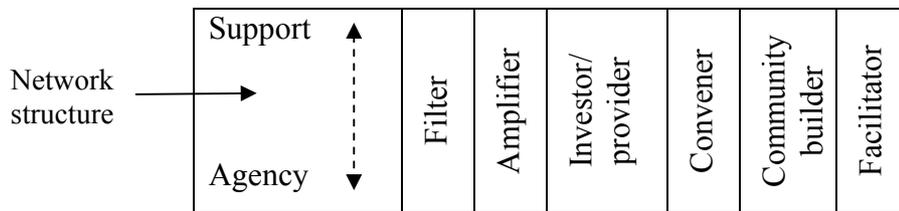
How the form helps define the functions of the network

F: Functions
G: Governance
L+S: Localisation and scope
C+S: Capacities and skills
R: Resources
M: Membership
C: Communications
S+A: Strategic and adaptive capacity
EE: External environment
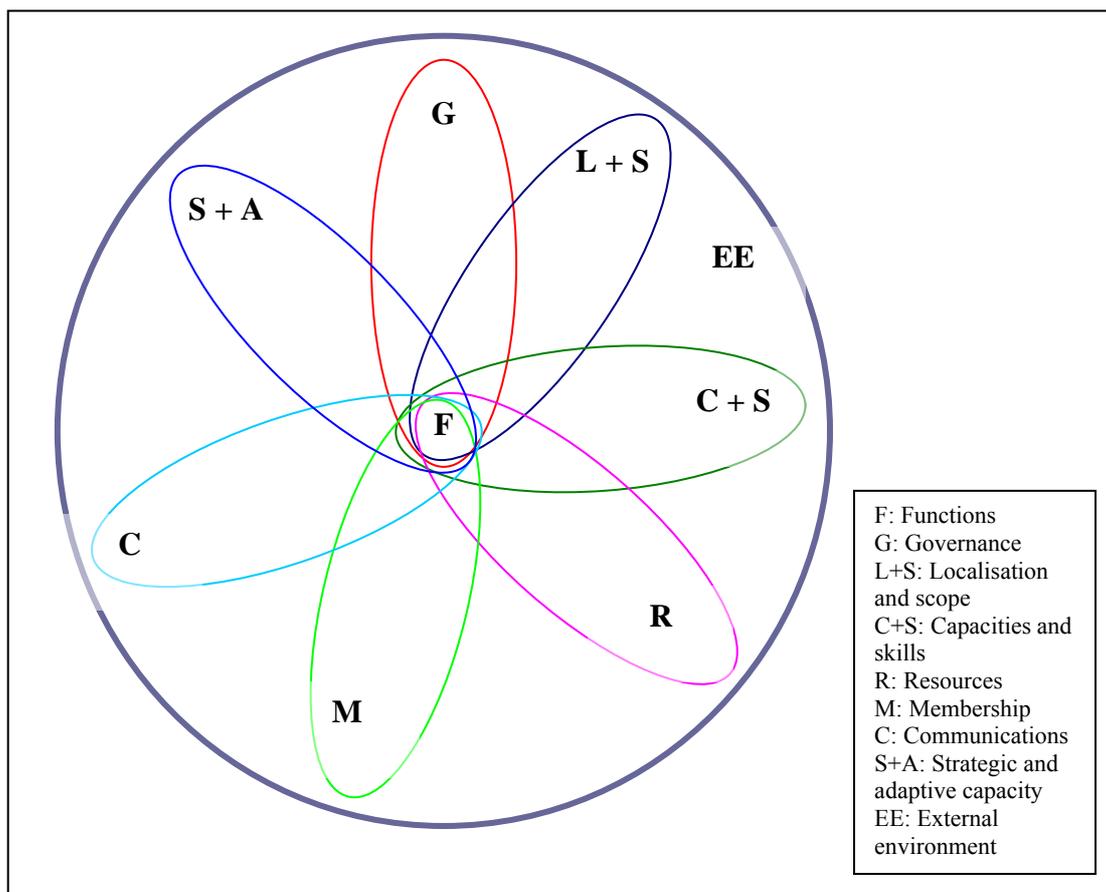
Using the framework in Cambodia

We understand, of course, that undertaking this analysis is easier said than done. A great deal of the information necessary for a thorough and detailed description is often held by multiple actors and is difficult to aggregate. In some cases, whether we are looking at a support or an agency network will be a matter for our own interpretation of the emphasis given to certain functions, not only in the official discourse but also in the informal opinions and stories of the members and staff. To capture this, the researchers collected information from various sources, including official documentation of the four networks, background studies and a series of structured interviews with key network staff and some members.

The studies were conducted in two stages, by Roo Griffiths and Ly Vichuta in Phnom Penh. First, they carried out a case study of COSECAM, in which the issue of trust as a key contextual factor was identified. Based on the methodological lessons drawn from this case, three more case studies, of NGOCRC, ECPAT Cambodia and MEDiCAM, were developed.

This paper is an attempt to synthesise the findings relevant to the function-form from all the cases.

Some background on the context

Although the external environment is part of the description of the network, we considered it appropriate to present it up-front, since it is shared by all and is also helpful in understanding the context of the cases described in the next section. Findings in this section come both from interviews with the networks and with member NGOs as well as from new and background research of the current cultural, political and social conditions in Cambodia. However, this section represents an overview of general conditions in Cambodia, not a specific review of issues that may have occurred within the networks and their spaces. It primarily reviews challenges, particularly in the areas relevant to the networks studied, which could impact on networks' operations.[2]

Cultural challenges

According to Bradley (2005: 36), in any study of networks 'it is important to consider Khmer culture and how it can affect networks and their functioning'. Cambodian culture has been through a difficult recent history; infamously illustrated by the Pol Pot era and its tearing asunder of local relationships and communities. The fragmentation of villages and people turning against one another during the purges and the 're-education' of the era led to the near disappearance of trust and horizontal linkages among the people of Cambodia. Families were forced to betray each other; young people were forced into marriage; and the paranoia of the central regime meant that nobody was safe and anybody could disappear at any given time. This regime was then followed by years of poverty, instability and guerrilla warfare – promoted by the deposed Khmer Rouge.

This has had an effect on present day Cambodian society and its institutions. All interviewees responded that trust was a big problem in networking in Cambodia. Although organisations in Cambodia may be working towards a common goal, and even as part of networks, jealousy and suspicion leads to hiding work from others, who are commonly seen as competitors. This makes it difficult for local NGOs who are interested in networking to cooperate with others. In some cases, it is hard to organise workshops or meetings because participants do not want to share information or do not trust other participants as they do not know them well enough. (Even when people know each other, trust can be absent: as one interviewee stated, 'I don't trust anyone in my country, except my family, and often not even them'.) This is also identified by Bradley (2005: 43), who says that 'according to a member of the Forestry Network, "some people are active, while some are free riders. For example, I myself tried to develop a proposal and then other members copied from me. Some people do not accept others' ideas for improvement."'

Another key consequence of this historical process is that formal institutions in Cambodia are sometimes subordinated to the power of informal networks (Hughes and Conway 2003). Hence while formal institutions suffer from the lack of trust

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[2] For more information on Cambodia's current political, economic and social situation we suggest: Hughes and Conway's Drivers of Change analysis of Cambodia that can be found at: http://www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/DOC11.pdf

among its members, other networks exist that draw more attention and demand stricter loyalty.

This is exacerbated by other aspects of Khmer culture: some of these are traditional and some have been adopted more recently. 'Many Khmers hesitate to ask others for help […] questioning is not common in Asian culture. Questioning may be perceived as a way of accusing or looking down on someone' (Bradley 2005: 36). This is part of the broader Asian concept of 'losing face' and often leads to actors preferring not to communicate with others so as not to look lost or unaware about any particular issue, or to them agreeing with something without really being committed to it. Khmer reluctance to lose face means that development practitioners are often not motivated to join training programmes or to admit failures. Today capacity is growing steadily; however, many Cambodians who are fully involved in building the capacity of others are being treated with suspicion or jealousy. Unfortunately, capacity is still lacking among local NGOs in the countryside: it is hard to attract skilled staff to fill jobs outside the capital, as conditions are poor and infrastructure is weak.

In addition, Khmer history and tradition has led to its society being markedly hierarchical which means that policies and decisions are top-down processes (Hughes and Conway 2003). This top-down approach is explicit at the interpersonal level where people build relationships through a patron-client system that grants them 'security and opportunities in return for support and agreement with his/her decisions. This system makes it very difficult to ensure genuine participation' (Bradley 2005: 37); which has been historically low (Hughes and Conway 2003). This has resulted in part from the need for a system for conflict-resolution and general day-to-day administration in the absence of horizontal links among the population: vertical links are made based on power and patronage to replace other networking systems.

Challenges in the NGO climate

Cambodia has a large number of international aid agencies, with increasingly higher funds to distribute among local NGOs;[3] there is also a disproportionately large and growing number of such local NGOs.[4] Symptoms of such a climate include the existence of too many NGO meetings and the proliferation of international development jargon in Cambodia, much of which is difficult for members of local NGOs to cope with and which can contribute to workshop/bureaucratic overload.

The NGO climate in Cambodia is considered difficult to work in. It is often hard to motivate people to attend meetings; in some cases, participants will not attend without receiving a per diem, even if the meeting is close by and short. Requirements on formatting of proposals and reporting for local NGOs are difficult to master, and concepts such as indicators, objectives and other evaluation-related terms are still not widely understood. As such, it is difficult for participants of a workshop or network

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[3] According to the Council for Development of Cambodia in 2004 (CDC), the amount of foreign aid disbursed during the last twelve years (1992-2003) reached US$5.2 billion. 'The CDC report showed that foreign aid disbursements increased steadily, reaching US$546 million in 2003, up from US$531 million in 2002 and US$472 million in 2001. See Economics Institute of Cambodia (2005). This rose to over US$600 million for 2006 (Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Cambodia to the UN, 2006)

[4] The number of NGOs in Cambodia has risen steadily, from 180 (INGOs and NGOs) in 1994, to 532 in 2000, to 1129 in 2005 (NGO Forum on Cambodia, 2006).

members to understand or agree on comprehensive approaches and strategies in which there is overall buy-in. Capacity is growing, but donors find that preparation of the necessary documents as well as accountability and monitoring are still weak. It can often seem that donor demands for high capacity in reporting and applying for funds are not matched by the inputs into building the capacity to do so; this is ironic, given the current focus on funding capacity building projects – which local NGOs do not yet have the capacity to apply for. A vicious circle ensues: NGO applications for funding for capacity building are rejected on the basis that they do not have the capacity to apply.

All this has a negative effect on members' coordination efforts, particularly if they are outside the capital and the network is heavily centralised. Indeed, Cambodia is sometimes seen as the 'Republic of Phnom Penh' because of the differences in levels of infrastructure and investment between the capital and the provinces. With more funding in the capital, it is not strange to notice a growing inequality in skills and attitude between the centre and the periphery.

Challenges in the political arena

As Bradley (2005: 8) suggests, 'in Cambodia, civil society has been given a relatively large degree of freedom to form associations or networks, both formal and informal.' However, the recent political climate in Cambodia has made it difficult for people and organisations to carry out outspoken advocacy activities. At the end of 2005, human rights activists were jailed for defamation of political authorities and some prominent figures were forced to flee the country (Development Weekly, 6-12 Feb 2006). All have recently been released, pardoned and/or allowed to return, and Prime Minister Hun Sen has made claims that he is going to work towards decriminalising defamation. Many doubted his motivations (suspecting that such claims were made for the benefit of donors, see Cambodia Daily, 2006b, 23 February). Whether or not this is the case, these temporary freedoms appear, at present, to be holding. However, it can still be difficult for NGOs to appear to be criticising the government (or anyone, as we have already seen), and the Cambodian political scene is characterised by instability and sudden governmental changes of mind. This makes it hard to hold dialogue, debate, promote advocacy and find new alternatives for change. In the case of MEDiCAM, this is exemplified by the fact that, 'while lots of work goes into policy development and ensuring that a policy process is participative, the implementation of these polices clearly takes a backseat to political considerations in Cambodia' (ODI, 2005a).

Corruption plays a big role in Cambodian politics. In the case of sexual exploitation of children, a field in which three of the NGO networks studied work, it is vital to efforts to impact policy, particularly because it is alleged that high-ranking officers are involved in trafficking. The government is therefore reticent to clarify its stance on it. In general, there is a lack of clear counterparts. For example, there are problems in the area of the Cambodia National Council for Children (CNCC), which has a lack of qualified personnel. In addition, interested CSOs state that it is hard to contact the CNCC (NGOCRC, 2006: 49). There is a need for this and other public institutions to operationalise more and better human and financial resources and effective information management systems and to develop clear institutional positions. Without

these factors, it is difficult to see them operating effectively and, consequently, for networks to communicate with them and help them improve their policies.

Squabbling among ministers and officials leads to problems in the application of policies. A relevant example of this is the drafting by the Ministry of Justice of the anti-trafficking law when, at the same time, an Anti-Human Trafficking and Juvenile Protection Department exists within the Ministry of the Interior to address trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and children. There are also departments within the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation (ActionAid Vietnam, 2006 unreleased: 9). Such overlapping of responsibilities can cause confusion, leading to a lack of enforcement of existing laws.

Laws for minors/juveniles were, by late 2006, stuck at negotiation stages, and there was no juvenile court and no real understanding of child-sensitive approaches in legal issues. In addition, solutions to these problems are difficult to come by because the hierarchical culture makes it unnatural for Cambodians to criticise those in higher positions. At the same time, those in positions of power can be reluctant to lose face by admitting failings or discussing ways forward.

In the health sector, the subject of one of the case studies, the issues underlined have arisen in terms of transparency and accountability in policies and in budgetary disbursements (MEDiCAM, 2006). Also identified by practitioners in the sector is a lack of clear policy and strategic planning on the part of the government, particularly in terms of recruitment, training and salaries to health providers. MEDiCAM also underlines as crucial the need to strengthen certain areas of the health system, including public sector management; private sector engagement; and the formal involvement of CSOs. To top it up, there is a lack of quality information available in the area of government health sector reform (ODI, 2005b); in general, this is true for other sectors. This makes evidence-based policy advocacy even more difficult.

The four cases

This section presents a short background of each network studied, addressing their key objectives, roles and functions.[5] The networks are all Cambodian-led and illustrate the heterogeneity within civil society organisations. There are clear differences in terms of their degree of formality; access to resources; membership criteria and numbers; skills; centralisation; impact on policy; etc. We will try to address these issues in the following section when we present a synthesis and analysis of the structural characteristics of the networks.

The choice of networks deserves a brief note. These were chosen by the researchers based on their knowledge of their topic of focus and previous interactions with the networks; good relations were necessary to access key information. In any case, the studies helped both test the framework and draw some lessons from them that could be then compared with others.

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[5] For more information on each network, longer versions of the cases are available on RAPID's Networks website: http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/projects/ppa0103

Coalition to Address Sexual Exploitation of Children in Cambodia (COSECAM)

COSECAM was established in 2001 as a NGO and has 23 member organisations, with 10 new members being considered in 2006. Its aim is to address sexual exploitation of children in Cambodia. The network is based in Phnom Penh but works in the country's provinces through regional networks, and through the activities of its local NGO members.

The following table summarises the main objectives, responsibilities and activities of the network; highlighting the various functions and roles it plays.

Roles and Functions of COSECAM

Objectives	Responsibility	Activities	Roles and function
1. Strong coordination and cooperation among local NGOs with similar goals and objectives	Secretariat	Coordinates: implementation of Objectives 2, 3 and 4; communication between subcommittees and Steering Committee; work outside the Coalition; fundraising; proposals, budgets and work plans; meetings, trainings and workshops; reports to members and donors; brainstorms on possible projects	Filtering Amplifying Convening Facilitating **Support**
2. Developing comprehensive approaches and strategies	Steering Committee Delegate Group	To advise; represent; approve budget and; supervise and monitor implementation; support fundraising; assess Secretariat; approve issues to subcommittees; draft decision making; support subcommittees; approve audit	Amplifying Investing/ providing Convening Facilitating **Agency and Support**
3. Strengthening qualities and capacities of local NGOs in their specific work areas and increasing specialisation	Institutional development and human resource development subcommittee Rehabilitation and Reintegration subcommittee	Integrated child issue programming; programme staff training; provincial member NGO support; corporate development and cooperation Centre staff training; child rehabilitation services; vocation training scholarship fund	Investing/ providing (Building communities) Facilitating **Support**
4. Including advocacy, political pressure, and popular activism in the approach	Research subcommittee	Capacity of local organisations; demand factors for child sex; situation analysis for child	Amplifying Convening Facilitating **Agency**

		sex	
	Advocacy subcommittee	Policy influence; constituency support building; child advocacy	

NGO Committee on the Rights of the Child (NGOCRC)

NGOCRC was established in 1994 but was only registered as an NGO in 2002. It is slightly larger that COSECAM and has 46 member organisations, most of which are local Cambodian NGOs. Its aim is to provide a vehicle for organisations to work together to help children in Cambodia receive full respect of their rights. The organisation is based in Phnom Penh but some work takes place in the provinces through the activities of its local NGO members. Membership is currently free and open to all organisations working on child rights, although there is the chance in the future that the network will charge a nominal fee to cover running costs.

The following table summarises the main objectives, responsibilities and activities of the network; highlighting the various functions and roles it plays.

The roles and functions of NGOCRC

Objectives	Responsibility	Activities	Roles and Functions
1. To raise CRC (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) awareness to children and their parents, all relevant government officials and encourage effective implementation of CRC	Working Groups, network staff and Executive Committee	Gathering and sharing documentation; conducting awareness raising on children's issues in public areas to government and families; producing dissemination materials	Filtering Amplifying Convening Facilitating **Agency and Support**
2. To advocate for children's rights, especially to encourage government to formulate and amend laws and policies for children. This involves working with the CNCC (Cambodian National Council for Children)	Working Groups and Executive Committee	Distributing case documentation; organising meetings to lobby; encouraging cooperation of legal aid organisations and government institutions; organising a press conference on child abuse annually	Filtering Amplifying Convening Facilitating **Agency and Support**
3. To monitor and develop a supplementary report on the implementation of CRC in Cambodia and submit to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child	Working Groups and network staff	Producing and analysing a database of information on the child situation for annual dissemination to be able to compile a future shadow report to the UN, including research on child rights and production of a definition of at-risk children	Filtering Amplifying Facilitating **Agency and Support**
4. To build capacity of NGO members and follow-up on activities	Network staff	Providing knowledge training for the network on child rights, relationships, and solving problems; providing training to Working Groups on	Investing/ providing (Building communities) Facilitating

		information collection, analysis and reporting	**Support**
5. Strengthening and updating the structure of NGOCRC	Executive Committee, Secretary General and network staff	Putting in place procedures and principles, creating strategy	Facilitating **Support**

End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and the Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT) Cambodia

ECPAT International is a global network of organisations and individuals working together for the elimination of child prostitution, child pornography and the trafficking of children for sexual purposes. It seeks to encourage the world's community to ensure that children everywhere enjoy their fundamental rights, free and secure from all forms of exploitation. ECPAT Cambodia was established in 1995 by a group of NGOs, intending to create a joint force between national and international organisations. ECPAT Cambodia was registered as a member of ECPAT International in 1996 and became an affiliated member in September 2002. The network has 28 organisational members who share the objectives of ECPAT in terms of working against child exploitation.

The following table summarises the main objectives, responsibilities and activities of the network; highlighting the various functions and roles it plays.

The roles and functions of ECPAT Cambodia

Objectives	Responsibility	Activities	Role and Functions
1. Working for the understanding of CSEC issues and the adoption of appropriate legislation and advocating for the development and effective implementation of supportive and protective policies, child protection mechanisms and prevention measures against CSEC (awareness raising and advocacy)	Network staff, member volunteers	Production of materials to raise awareness of members and public through members; research, for the purposes of awareness raising; advocacy on the various CSEC issues, through lobbying of government on draft laws, and for the adoption of Anti-Trafficking Day Capacity-building training; developing and strengthening ECPAT profile; funding proposals and strategic planning	Filtering Amplifying Convening Facilitating Investing/ providing **Agency and Support**
2. Coordinating the exchange of information and best practice, and maximising interaction among key actors involved at both national and regional levels in the cause of protecting children from CSEC (coordination and cooperation)	Network staff, member volunteers	Strengthening cooperation and coordination among main actors Capacity-building training; developing and strengthening ECPAT profile; funding proposals and strategic planning	Filtering Amplifying Convening Facilitating Investing/ providing **Agency and Support**

| 3. Monitoring the implementation of the Cambodia National Five-Year Plan against Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation of Children. | Network staff, member volunteers | Monitoring the implementation of the National Plan of Action against CSEC

Capacity-building training; developing and strengthening ECPAT profile; funding proposals and strategic planning | Filtering Amplifying Facilitating Investing/ providing **Agency and Support** |

MEDiCAM

MEDiCAM is a non-profit and non-partisan membership organisation for NGOs active in Cambodia's health sector. By far the largest of the four networks in this study, every year it gathers approximately 110 to 115 members from both international and local NGOs, as well as UN and bilateral agencies acting as observers. MEDiCAM was created in July 1989, while the country was still suffering an economic embargo and diplomatic isolation from western nations. A group of NGOs active in the health sector started to gather and exchange information, eventually adopting the name MEDiCAM. Several NGO pioneers ensured that the association slowly took a formal shape. In 1991, the Ministry of Health formally recognised MEDiCAM as the umbrella organisation officially representing the NGOs active in Cambodia's health sector. As such, MEDiCAM representatives have been invited to almost all official meetings related to health in the country and actively contributes to both the policymaking surrounding and the implementation of the health sector reform process, engaged in by the government since 1996.

The following table summarises the main objectives, responsibilities and activities of the network; highlighting the various functions and roles it plays.

The roles and functions of MEDiCAM

Objectives	Responsibility	Activities	Roles and Functions
1. Information exchange	Secretariat (particularly MEDiNEWS, Office Manager, and IT)	4Ms meeting; MEDiNEWS, the monthly newsletter crossing a wide agenda of health sector topics, available in English and Khmer and widely distributed among members and officials; and the website/database facility	Filtering Amplifying Convening Facilitating **Agency**
2. Facilitating advocacy	Working Groups and Secretariat (particularly Advocacy Coordinator)	Formulating positions for development of Cambodia's health system, and advocacy with the RGC in specific areas (e.g., reproductive health, child survival)	Amplifying Convening Facilitating **Agency and Support**
3. Capacity building for MEDiCAM members	Secretariat (particularly PNCB and BMCC departments)	BMCC addresses NGO needs in strategic planning, programme design, proposals/reports, M&E, and human resources and financial management. PNCB widens access and provides training on primary healthcare,	Investing/ providing (Building communities) Facilitating **Agency and Support**

		HIV/AIDS counselling, M&E etc	
4. Representing the NGO community	Secretariat (particularly Executive Director, Health Information Officers)	Involvement in CG; government TWGs; JAPR; Health Congress; COCOM; GFATM; and many MoH working groups. Preparing annual position paper to CG meeting	Amplifying Convening Facilitating **Agency**

Analysis of the form and functions of Cambodian networks

This section considers some of the key characteristics of the structure of the Cambodian networks studied in this paper. The table below offers a summary of their internal and external structure – incorporating the functions and external environment discussed earlier as well as more detail on the networks' structural characteristics themselves.

Quite clearly, MEDiCAM shows both more functions carried out and a more developed structure: stronger governance, more decentralisation, more capacities and skills, more stable access to resources, a sound communications strategy and an elaborate yet clear membership structure. Also significant is the other end of the spectrum, where NGOCRC, with limited staff, no clear governance and limited resources and skills, has to focus on fewer functions.

Function and Form

	NGOCRC	ECPAT Cambodia	COSECAM	MEDiCAM
Roles	• Agency: Advocacy and research • Support: Capacity building	• Agency: Advocacy, research and awareness raising • Support: Capacity building and advocacy support	• Agency: Advocacy and research • Support: Capacity building and funding for projects	• Agency: Advocacy and research • Support: Capacity building and facilitation
Function *	f, a, i/p, c	ff, a, i/p, c, fa	f, aa, i/pp, cc, fa	F, A, i/p, cc, fafa
* F: Filtering; A: Amplifying; I/P: Investing/Providing; C: Convening; Cb: Community building; Fa: Facilitating Scale: Less ← f, ff, F → More				
Governance	• No governance agreement • Unclear structure • Secretary General's role not clear • Hierarchical • Members are not aware of objectives • Low levels of participation	• Improving governance • No participation agreement • Greater clarity and improved processes • Still no clear objectives • No working groups • Low levels of	• Governance agreement • Clear structure • Heterarchical (hierarchical form but decentralised skills) • Well known brand • Clear understanding of objectives • Not too sure about	• Strong governance • Clear governance agreement and systems • Good financial reporting and strategic planning • High profile brand

	• Juxtaposing with other networks	participation	strategy • Limited participation	• Clear understanding of objectives and strategy • Participation agreement
Localisation and scope	• Headquarters in Phnom Penh • Members are decentralised • Most activities are centralised • Policy formulation and implementation	• Headquarters in Phnom Penh • Very centralised • National policies • All stages of policy process	• Headquarters in Phnom Penh • Decentralised via sub-networks • All stages of policy process but mostly policy formulation and implementation • Most work responds to demand from beneficiaries or end users of research	• Headquarters in Phnom Penh • Decentralised via two provincial offices • All stages of the policy process but mostly policy formulation and implementation • Not just government but also donors
Capacity and skills	• Not enough staff • Current staff is skilled • Current staff is new • Khmer staff • IT, administration and finance skills are good • No communications or advocacy experts • No fundraising or strategic development skills • Limited management skills	• Strong capacity of Secretariat • Khmer staff • No communications or advocacy or legal experts • No working groups (difficult to implement activities)	• Strong capacity of Secretariat • Research, networking, communications, management and fundraising skills are good • Some problems among members skills	• Strong capacity of Secretariat • Khmer staff • Research, networking, communications, management and fundraising skills are good • Capacity for evidence based policymaking influence • Some problems among a few members
Resources	• Low funding and lack of appropriate ICT and KM systems • Human resources are skilled but insufficient and new	• Good funding and ICT • Human resources are limited	• Good funding, ICT and human resources • Good gender balance among staff	• Good funding, ICT and human resources
Membership	• Voluntary and free subject to vote • Rather homogenous group of NGOs • Hierarchical membership structure	• Clear membership criteria • Joining fee (to be increased) • No obligations for members	• Clear membership criteria • Voluntary and free subject to 3 member references • Rotating membership of steering committee and chairmanship	• Three levels of membership – clear criteria for each • Fee is different for each level • A minimum amount of participation is required from members and some tasks are mandatory

				• Membership agreement • More heterogeneous membership
Communication	No clear communications plan	No clear plan, but high profile and developing communications activities	Strategy, staff and funding	Strategy, staff, funding and ICT
External Environment	**Cultural challenges** • Lack of trust • Weak institutions • Hesitation to ask and offer help • Fear of losing face • Highly hierarchical (patron-client relations) • Reluctance to be critical of others	**Challenges in the NGO climate** • Participation-per-diem • Highly centralised aid industry • Bureaucratic institutions and process • Lack of capacity • Proliferation of NGOs seeking funding	**Challenges in the political arena** • Relatively low freedom of speech • Strong executive • Corruption • Weak judicial system • Lack of transparency and accountability • Juxtaposing of programmes and responsibilities	
Strategic and adaptive capacity	• Can deal with internal and external changes • Currently improving its structure • Has difficulty with expansion of network • Leader and staff are new • Dependent on funding from external sources (donors and INGOs)	• Can deal with internal and external changes • Carries out self-assessments • Flexible • Decisions are made by the whole network • Dependent on funding from external sources (donors and INGOs)	• Can deal with internal and external changes • Flexible • Decentralised decision-making • Key actors are competent • Dependent on funding from external sources (donors and INGOs)	• Can deal with internal and external changes • Flexible • Can deal with reform processes • Is upgrading outputs and strategies • Partly dependent on steady funding from external sources (donors and INGOs) but could be sustainable (based on fees) in the future

The objective of this particular study was to try to identify some patterns or relationships between function and form. In essence, which structural characteristics may allow networks to carry out which functions? We recognise that it is difficult to draw global conclusions from four examples from one country. And that, in any case, these examples respond to a particular external environment. However, we still think it is worthwhile to detail some relationships between form and function that might be relevant for other networks in Cambodia and elsewhere, in similar contexts.

The following provides an annotated list of some of the characteristics that seem, from the networks studied, to explain a particular ability to carry out each function.

In an unfriendly context for policy advocacy like Cambodia, where donors and policymakers foment competition rather than collaboration and where social and cultural institutions make it difficult for networks to operate as such, it is not surprising that the networks studied seem more geared towards agency roles. Their support roles are limited to capacity building which is not significant. There is, however, a strong emphasis on centrally commissioning research to be used in advocacy campaigns. This is perfectly understandable in the context in which they work – although not necessarily desirable.

Filtering

While all networks carry out some level of filtering it seems that those in which this involves a larger volume and variety of sources and types of information share good communications skills and resources as well as some level of capacity for evidence-based policy influencing. Access to ICT is another possible characteristic of good filters in this context. MEDiCAM's communications with new members by means of email on the importance of being involved in the network is key to its dissemination strategy.

The size and diversity of the network might also be a factor of influence. MEDiCAM's members do not only demand but also produce a great deal of information, which increases the level of filtering required from the network. Often, the skills to filter information are there but there is not enough to filter. Access to it is essential, and this can be achieved by larger networks (or with links to others, such as in the case of ECPAT Cambodia's relationship with ECPAT International).

Amplifying

In many ways, amplifying functions build on top of the skills and resources necessary for filtering; after all, it is filtered information that the networks tend to amplify. Better communication strategies are therefore necessary. COSECAM and MEDiCAM are apparently better suited for this, with clear strategies and access to the necessary staff, resources and funding. Better communication skills are also seen in the most effective amplifying networks studied, partly because their membership seems to be more heterogeneous – and therefore demanding of more specialised information.

At least in the case of MEDiCAM, participation in the activities of the network is high. This in itself provides opportunities for communication and sharing of information – at a relatively low cost (word of mouth). COSECAM (and MEDiCAM, to some extent, through its decentralised structure) has a *heterarchical* structure (in which particular skills are held in different parts of the network) and hence the amplification function is decentralised and closer to the end users.

Another characteristic that seems important, in the case of COSECAM, is the level of relevance that the network's research and advocacy activities has for the end users. COSECAM's research, it appears, is demand driven and, therefore, has an additional incentive to amplify its findings 'downwards' towards the ultimate beneficiaries of its members.

Convening

Convening functions are expected to require similar but more specialised and deeper skills and resources from those necessary for filtering and amplifying (Yeo and Mendizabal 2004). Convening networks need to filter and amplify information for very different types of audiences –and must do so in a differentiated manner. It helps, therefore, to have a heterogeneous and demanding membership. This, as well as the level of decentralisation or heterarchy of the network, its involvement in various stages and levels of the policy process, and the levels of participation by its members can be seen as incentives to acquiring the necessary convening skills and resources.

Again, it is MEDiCAM and COSECAM the ones that show more developed convening functions. They have good networking, management, logistical and fundraising skills, which are consistent with the capacity to organise large events or manage long-term processes of partnership building between different groups. These organisational skills need to be complemented by excellent communication skills and resources, clear roles and responsibilities among the members (hence participation and governance agreements are important –and present in both cases) and overall secure, long-term funding, since convening functions may take more than a few years to master.

Investing/providing

All networks invest in their members by providing them with support through capacity building. Only COSECAM seems to use the network to distribute resources for its beneficiaries. What seems to set COSECAM apart from all the other networks is on explicit demand-driven approach to its work and the existence of decentralised sub-networks. This leads to decentralised decision making and more command over the processes of funding distribution. This requires strong fundraising, management and financial skills that are not common in all networks studied.

It is slightly surprising that more resources do not flow from the secretariats to the members (or that this does not show more prominently in the analysis of the networks). In a context of low resource and capacity levels outside Phnom Penh, it could be expected that a key and high priority role for civil society networks would be to attend to this. Emphasis, however, seems to be towards agency, driven from the Secretariat itself. Nonetheless, this is consistent with the analysis of the external environment, in particular by the issues around lack of trust (which might explain why there is little systematic effort to decentralise skills, power and voice through capacity building); an aversion to 'losing face' by asking for help; and the highly centralised decision making structure of the public sector.

In the absence of stable financial support, membership fees (or at least the ability to pay from some members and capacity building users) can help a network to set up and implement capacity building programmes. On the other hand, a strategic use of the filtered information can be seen as a providing function (provision of knowledge).

Community building

Surprisingly, the studies did not identify a community building function although, it could be said that the networks, through their formation, have fulfilled it already. The focus on agency roles, amplifying functions and the hierarchical structure of the networks support the findings. It is difficult to build a community with strongly hierarchical structures. The more decentralised networks, on the other hand, can move from a situation of a leadership-based network to a community-driven one with greater ease.

It also difficult to build communities in a context in which interpersonal relations are week as in Cambodia. The lack of trust, highlighted in the brief background section, contributes to the allocation of resources towards building stronger relationships between the members, rather than on vertical solutions or strategies led by one, a few members or the secretariat. This can also have an effect on whether the network amplifies information out or inwardly; the distribution of resources though investing in network members and the sharing of information for filtering.

Facilitating

Facilitating functions are difficult to place. They are often confused with the other functions. The main difference is that facilitation is about helping the members carry out their own work, where the other functions are about the network as an entity and not about the members. Hence, the more decentralised and the stronger and more self-sufficient the members are, the more likely they are to develop facilitation functions. Facilitation requires an understanding between the roles of the network and its members (hence a clear governance agreement and membership criteria and responsibilities).

Facilitation also requires facilitation, evidently, and other specialised skills held by the Secretariat, which can be accessed by the members when they require them. It could help, therefore, if the members had access to funding to pay for these specialised services (either directly from their own donors or though the network).

Some emerging themes

An interesting finding of the cases is that at least NGOCRC, ECPAT Cambodia and MEDiCAM show a process of **progressive formalisation** in their histories. All began as informal institutions gathering interested actors. Only after a few years did they become formal bodies and, in the case of ECPAT Cambodia, join international alliances. This somewhat 'natural' development process is common with other networks which emphasise community building functions in their early stages to then replace them with more outward-looking ones. There is hence an argument for **sequencing the adoption of functions** to reflect the maturity of the members, access to resources and skills and the pressures and opportunities of the external environment. The MEDiCAM case is a good example of this.

In the cases, **flexibility** was equated with the network's ability to fulfil various functions simultaneously. This is an interesting suggestion, as up until now the literature on networks has granted flexibility based on networks' idealised horizontal and 'flexible' structures (Mendizabal 2006a). In reality, as we have seen, networks can be extremely vertical and show rather 'un-flexible' structures, with many formal

processes and systems which would make change difficult. If we look at the multiple functions, we get an image of a network that can do many things for its members and, at least, seem flexible to them. Long-term flexibility, however, will depend on the network's capacity to adopt new functions or strengthen one or more of those functions at short notice.

It is important to emphasise that although there are differences in the shapes, skills, resources and other characteristics of the networks and that some carryout more specialised functions than others **all fulfil valuable roles**. NGOCRC and ECPAT Cambodia, which according to this analysis are the least developed of the four cases, provide their members with at least four different functions. And they do so with a limited set of skills and resources. This should hence be seen as an opportunity for improvement and MEDiCAM and COSECAM's experiences as possible guidelines for future strengthening.

Trust is an issue that was highlighted by the cases and the context. In general, it is assumed that networks unite and help develop a single voice. Hence the support from donors for the formation of networks in developing countries: they can become a stronger force of change but also can be easier to deal with. However, without the basic social foundations (like trust) networks can help make the context even more complex for civil society, donors and governments alike. In some cases, not only in Cambodia, networks compete for funding with their own members – often winning, as networks may appear stronger and enjoy of better profiles – and then subcontract non-members or hire new staff to undertake the work.

Conclusions

This paper has presented a brief account of four research policy networks in Cambodia. By using the function-form approach we hope to have provided a useful description of these networks, the type of work they carry out and the challenges and opportunities they face. The analysis of their functions and form has also provided us with some basic suggestions about the set of structural characteristics that might make it easier for some functions to be fulfilled. A key question we wanted to ask, however, was whether looking at networks through the eye of the function form approach was helpful at all.

Hence some methodological lessons learned from this exercise are:
- It can be difficult to assess networks at the lower end of the 'successful networks scale' from the function-form approach. This is a result of the lack of understanding in such networks regarding the purpose of the research, which is exacerbated by a certain lack of understanding of the factors involved in running a network, particularly the functions. In addition, low performing networks can find it hard to carryout self-assessments, and this can reflect on the analysis by making it difficult to gather information. It is important, therefore, for the research methodology to be able to adapt to take into account the needs of the networks in question.
- The function-form approach is useful in generating general conclusions for the networks interviewed in that a great deal of information can be honed to offer

some clearer answers. Providing it is adapted for each individual network studied, it seems possible to avoid dangerous generalisations.

- It is critical to be aware of the external environment in carrying out research in networks following the function-form approach. Specific country characteristics (identified in this paper) can lead to fear of the research, reluctance to answer questions, possible untruths to protect the network from shame, and embarrassment at any perceived criticism that might arise. It is vital, then, to ensure that any such research is carried out by those well aware of such issues, who can then approach interviews with tact and understanding, and can use observation to extract facts.

- Having a clearer picture of where the networks are at this stage might help them think about how to get to where they would rather be in the future. To move from low to higher levels of facilitation or convening, for example, networks could consider the various changes and improvements they would need to affect on their structure thus developing a strategy for change management.

In considering networks as agents of change in Cambodia, it seems that there is currently a move towards more understanding of this concept. Most of the cases studied reflected an awareness of the need to adapt the form of the network to suit the functions, even if they had no knowledge of such terminology. In MEDiCAM's case, this awareness was available to the level of a sophisticated understanding of specific issues for the network to deal with in the future.

It is true that the Cambodian case is constrained, particularly by its external environment. As with so many other areas, it seems that there is a need for a long-term focus on adapting social behaviours, kicked off by members of society itself, before there can be much hope for strong horizontal linkages. However, such an issue has been identified as key by the interviewees, which is a vital first step in the process. In addition, as with other areas (such as in rural conflict resolution, for example), it seems that social behaviour and social capital can be generated *after* and *concurrent* to the building of networks; in the case of Thailand, it has been seen that this has been more successful than efforts to build social capital prior to carrying out activities.[6] This might possibly be an interesting area for future study; at the very least, it offers some hope for the Cambodian situation.

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