

Addendum

Follow-up Research for:

**Working with and between Citizens and a Neo-patrimonial
Government: How Has an NGO's Contextualised Rights-based
Approach Influenced Cambodians' Agency in Fulfilling their Rights to
Development?**

Edd Thesis

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Introduction

Since after the defence and completion of my thesis I had an opportunity to stay in Cambodia for several months from 2014 to 2015 on sabbatical leave for research, I decided to conduct post-research interviews with some of the senior staff of Life with Dignity (LWD) and the specialists on land issues in Cambodia, in order to gain their feedback for the thesis, to influence LWD's practice as a result of the findings, and to negotiate for the publication of the thesis. From an ethical point of view, Cupples and Kindon (2003), Storey and Scheyvens (2003) and Brydon (2006) recommend follow-up research for such purposes. To go further, if one considers research as continuously

reflective and negotiating activities, it seems natural to incorporate this kind of practice as part of a research journey.

This brief follow-up research particularly delves into the issues around LWD's non-confrontational approach with government, which is one of the main threads throughout this thesis and is also supported by existing empirical research on the rights-based approach (RBA). In particular, I look at the issues of the relation between LWD and social land concessions (SLCs), the recent development of LWD's acceptance of the new funding for SLCs from the World Bank, and LWD's awareness-raising among its project participants on the issue of neo-patrimonialism. The newly gained insights into these issues seem to further accentuate the limitations and pitfalls of or the trade-off associated with working with government as a strategy of RBA, which was discussed in the thesis. Finally, I reflect on the process of this follow-up research with LWD. It was not a straightforward process and indeed opened up further complexities in the form of the tension between research and practice.

On Social Land Concessions (SLCs)

Although in the main body of the thesis I referred to government's rhetorical use of SLCs to divert attention from economic land concessions (ELCs) and thus to maintain its neo-patrimonialism as a *hidden agenda* of SLCs, through the follow-up interviews I find that there is no political game or premeditated plan behind SLCs. Rather, government seems to have happened to use the rhetoric for these purposes. In addition, there is no *shared will* between government and LWD in this practice. Hence the statement: “[the World Bank] and LWD can be considered complicit in the Cambodian government's effort to maintain its neo-patrimonialism” (p. 121) might be

too strong and it should instead be rephrased as: “the bank and LWD *in effect became* complicit in the Cambodian government’s effort to maintain its neo-patrimonialism, *as an unintended consequence*.” Nevertheless, as the leading rights-based development NGO in Cambodia, LWD should not be totally naïve about this actual rhetorical practice of government and needs to exercise a wider and more careful social and political analysis, as discussed in the thesis.

One of LWD’s justifications for working on SLCs is to show a good model of SLCs in the Cambodian context where there has been so much focus on ELCs because of the easy and quick economic gain for both political and business elites, whilst the scale of SLCs has been significantly smaller due to the resources, complex processes and political will required for them. In particular, the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction, with which LWD has worked in the implementation of SLCs, has been impressed with the quality of LWD’s SLCs, and LWD strategically tries to use this line ministry to advocate to higher-level government about the potential of SLCs for the large number of the landless poor in Cambodia. This again resonates with LWD’s principle of working with government to gradually influence them. However, yet again, this approach itself does not seem to change government’s tendency to use SLCs as a passive revolution: the acceptance of certain demands by citizens to prevent their hegemony from being challenged (Sassoon, 1982).

On Life with Dignity’s (LWD) Acceptance of the Second Phase Funding for Social Land Concessions (SLCs) from the World Bank

LWD received the rather controversial second phase funding for SLCs from the World Bank in 2014. The World Bank had suspended the release of further funding for

Cambodia since 2011 due to the unresolved issue of the urban land grabbing from of the Boeung Kak Lake community in Phnom Penh, in which some of the evicted had not been properly compensated. This second phase funding for SLCs is controversial, because despite the fact that the matter of the Boeung Kak Lake community had still not been resolved, the bank went ahead and released the funding. The media and the NGO community harshly criticised this move by the bank.

LWD's justification for receiving this funding is to meet the dire needs of people who have settled in the existing SLCs, which LWD has been assisting. As a former service-delivery and needs-based NGO, it is no surprise that they took this pragmatic direction of meeting the needs of people on the ground. However, as the leading rights-based development NGO in Cambodia, it is a little tricky and problematic to take this pragmatic service-delivery approach without reflecting on the implications of not being part of the united front of the anti-land grabbing movement together with other NGOs; it could, for example, send them wrong signal to government.

On Awareness-raising of Neo-patrimonial Practice

Although I stated in the thesis that LWD did not problematise and make people aware of the neo-patrimonial and corrupt practices of government (p. 142), through the follow-up interviews I realised that it would be more accurate to state that although LWD has not directly raised people's awareness of such practices, it has *indirectly* made people and local government aware of these through sensitising them in relation to human rights and governance. On the other hand, it has not been able to do anything to the practice of neo-patrimonialism that is happening at the higher strata of government. LWD has also realised that its rights-based intervention with government including at a

local level has not been sufficient and hence in the next five years it will attempt to create mechanisms for people's voices to be heard by government, including the facilitation of public forums with not only a government agenda but also a people's one. However, LWD still cannot directly engage with government – especially higher-level government – over such a politically-related issue as neo-patrimonialism. Because of this limitation, the former executive director of LWD left in 2014 and has become part of a new social and political movement to engage more directly with politics in an attempt to bring about speedier and more substantive government reforms.

Working with Government and the Limitations and Pitfalls of This

It is necessary for LWD to work with government because of its RBA to reinforce the interactions between people and local government on the ground. Moreover, working with government is perhaps the only realistic option that this NGO could choose, given the oppressive political structure, as pointed out in the thesis. In addition, LWD's moderate approach has been gradually bringing about further shifts in the structure through sensitising and capacitating people and local government. This indeed is one of the lessons to be learnt and followed up by other rights-based development NGOs. But this follow-up research seems to confirm that such a principle inevitably poses the limitations of LWD not being able to reflect on wider social and political terrains and directly engage with neo-patrimonialism as trade-offs, hence rendering it a pitfall to work with government, especially as the leading rights-based development NGO.

Reflection on the Process of Follow-up Research: Emerging Tension between Research and Practice

During the post-research interviews and negotiations, LWD and I respected each other's point of view. LWD listened to and understood my findings. On the other hand, I re-learned, to a greater degree, the realities that they faced and the reasons why they clung to their approach. I am glad that I did this follow-up research as otherwise I would have continued remaining on the critical side without being fully aware of their struggles as well as the potential of their approach. As stated in the thesis, what I claim as knowledge in my research is inevitably constrained by available discourses and conceptual and theoretical frameworks and thus should be treated as an open-ended and tentative understanding of the phenomena, in which there is still space for critique (Sayer, 2004). Critical realism, which brings extant knowledge and theories vertically onto the phenomenon in question, seems especially prone to a theoretical leap that may ignore the struggles and knowledge of practitioners on the ground. In this sense, I think that my return to the field was good practice, in order to make my research findings open to critique from the field.

On the other hand, as stated, LWD's responses were indeed rather near-sighted in the sense that they focused on what was feasible and imminent on the ground, often lacking reflection on the overall political picture—more concretely, the risk of being complicit with neo-patrimonialism. Moreover, although LWD listened to and understood my point of view, they did not seem to agree with my critique, which, as an academic work, focused on the problematics and suggested the repoliticisation of their insufficiently politicised RBA which is unlike normal development consultants (Wilson, 2004). This indicates their lack of what Houston (2001) calls *professional reflexivity*,

ignoring unobservable generative mechanisms and hence the root cause of injustices, namely neo-patrimonialism. But such an attitude is the product of their position within the community of depoliticised development NGOs in Cambodia as well as in relation to oppressive government, or reflects their internal conversation whereby such social structures are internalised within their mindset (Archer, 2003), which might make it difficult for them to think and act differently (unless their reflexivity in relation to such structures is somehow heightened).

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