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# **The importance of language in international development cooperation**

**A Cambodian case study**

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The MFS Scholarship Programme gives Swedish university students the opportunity to carry out fieldwork in low- and middle income countries, or more specifically in the countries included on the *DAC List of ODA Recipients*, in relation to their Bachelor's or Master's thesis.

Sida's main purpose with the MFS Scholarship Programme is to stimulate the students' interest in, as well as increasing their knowledge and understanding of development issues. The Minor Field Studies provide the students with practical experience of field work in developing settings. A further aim of Sida is to strengthen the cooperation between Swedish university departments and institutes and organisations in these countries.

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When I write “I”, I many times want to write “we”. Thank you Yin Dara and Seng Sorphorn. Without your knowledge and interest the study wouldn’t have been what it is.

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#### Abstract

As in most places in the world, English is the first language used within development cooperation in Cambodia. Language is not a neutral tool of communication and each language builds on the history and culture in which it has been shaped.

Drawing on a theoretical framework often summed up as languages of development, this case study aims to make a contribution to the debate about the importance of language in development cooperation. It is a case study of one gender project at a local youth organisation in Cambodia.

The study finds that it is difficult to distinguish specific effects of language choice from other political and economic factors involved in development cooperation, but that speaking in English drastically limits the possibility to speak to most of the intended beneficiaries and puts a lot of responsibility upon local development practitioners who can mediate between international actors and ordinary citizens.

Key words: Cambodia - language of development - Khmer language - local NGO’s - international development cooperation

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## Abbreviations

NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
INGO	International Non Governmental Organisation
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia
WID	Women in Development
GAD	Gender and Development

## Note on places and recurring names

### *Places*

Phnom Penh:	capital city of Cambodia
Kompong Cham:	the 11 <sup>th</sup> largest province of Cambodia, situated on the central lowlands of the Mekong River

### *Names*

Yin Dara:	partner in this project (for presentation see Method)
Seng Sorphorn:	partner in this project (for presentation see Method)
Ith Pov:	senior program officer at Forum Syd Cambodia
Un Leang:	PhD student making a comparative study of education and development in post-conflict Uganda and Cambodia

## Section One - Introduction

### 1.1 The research problem

Over the world and during different times there have been many visions of what development is. In our contemporary world there are probably more different ways of defining development than there has ever been before. Yet most people would agree that the essence of development is about change for the better, however defined, that in turn involves people doing things differently (Powell 2006:519).

For change to be sustainable it has to build on a good understanding of the socio-economic or socio-cultural realities that it will take place in and that it aims to change. Furthermore, it has been shown that successful development projects not only have to build on the local context, but that they also have to have the sensitivity and ability to adapt to the current situation as it evolves (Korten 1980:496). Successful development work therefore have to build on a good understanding of the particular local development context and also on an appreciation of the perceptions of local populations as to their options in that reality (Powell 2006:519).

These thoughts are reflected in international development trends stressing individual countries' "ownership" over their development processes and the strategy for international organisations to form partnerships with local organisations, instead of being donors and receivers. Sensitivity towards local contexts is also important for the notion of sustainable development and participatory development that has been promoted since the 1970's and the call for attention to indigenous or local knowledge. In these debates the role of language is often forgotten. In development cooperation language has an essential role in communicating ideas, knowledge and experiences. Language is not a neutral tool of communication. Each language builds on the history and culture in which it has been shaped (Sharifian 2011). In addition the English language that is spoken by development experts, funders, researchers and development practitioners is heavily influenced by international discourses on development. The English language spoken in development cooperation can therefore be said to have its own rules and constraints on what can and what cannot be said (Mills 2007:7).

In Cambodia English is the main language for communication between international actors, and between international actors and Cambodian institutions, non-governmental organisations and other national development actors. In his charting of the English language in Cambodia, Clayton concludes that "English is the language of international cooperation ...full stop" and that it seems safe to conclude that most international organisations in Cambodia will continue to use English in the future (Clayton 2006:98, 115).

Several studies have shown that the values that development efforts are based on are different from traditional Cambodian values to the extent that it is possible to talk about a development worldview and a traditional

worldview (Nee & McCallum 2009, O’Leary and Nee 2001, Ovesen et al 1996). For example, whereas the development worldview is based on the value of equity and that all human beings have rights, the Cambodian traditional worldview is based on values of order and conformity and the Cambodian society is structured around a well-defined social hierarchy. And when the development perspective advocates participation and everyone’s equal value to have a voice, the Cambodian traditional perspective values harmony and consensus and teaches that conflict is bad (O’Leary & Nee 2001:63).

Of course it is not only a question of language and the fundamental issues are about power structures in development cooperation and the validity of international development discourses to guide local development. However, the power of language lies in languages ability to represent reality. In the ambition to create meaningful, desired and sustainable change it is therefore interesting to study the role language plays in development cooperation. Because as Powell asserts, “By failing to engage systematically with local languages, the sector limits its understanding of and ability to communicate with most of its intended beneficiaries” (Powell 2006:523).

## 1.2 Aim and questions

The aim of this study is to contribute to the debate about the importance of language in international development cooperation. Seeing that an understanding of the local context, from a local perspective, is essential for development work, the study will investigate the potential of language in representing the local development context, as it is perceived by both local development professionals and ordinary people, such as youth and civil servants.

Since the international development actors in Cambodia clearly choose to use English as the main language for communication, this study will explore what differences there are between the Khmer and English language in their use in development and consequently what the implications of this language choice are.

This will be done by tracing a handful of development concepts from the English language to Khmer, looking at what meaning the concepts receive in Khmer as they are contextualised in the Cambodian context.

The study will answer the following questions:

- How do development professionals and ordinary people give meaning to and use the development concepts in Khmer?
- What role does the local NGO staff play as mediators/translators between the communities and their international development partners?

### 1.3 Limitations

The role of language within development cooperation in Cambodia is a wide area that is related to many different international and national actors and that intersects with many different areas of development practise. I have therefore chosen to look at development cooperation situated in the Cambodian civil society as distinguished from development driven by Cambodian governmental institutions. The study therefore represents a civil society perspective on development.

## Section Two – Background

### 2.1 Introducing Cambodia

The Kingdom of Cambodia is situated in Southeast Asia, sharing borders with Thailand in the west, Laos in the north and Vietnam in the east. The population of Cambodia is estimated to be 14,3 million people (World Bank: 2011). The largest religion in Cambodia is Buddhism.

During most of the modern times Cambodia has been under the influence of foreign powers, most notably during French colonisation. Eight different regimes have governed Cambodia since 1944 (Kiernan 2007). Despite the many chapters in Cambodian history that these represent, two eras can be said to stand out. The Sangkum era under king Sihanouk, which took place after the independence from the French in 1953, during which Cambodians enjoyed relative peace and prosperity, especially in the capital Phnom Penh. The Khmer Rouge regime still is the one that most tangible has influenced the Cambodian society. During the years 1975 to 1979 almost one out of four Cambodians died of starvation and persecution. The education system, cultural practices, historical accounts and institutions holding and promoting knowledge in Cambodia were completely destroyed. The first trial of the Khmer Rouge leaders responsible for the crimes committed during the civil war began in 2009 and is still ongoing. The experiences of the autocracies committed during the Khmer rouge period are still present in Cambodian life and has “left a deep-seated anxiety over what actually constituted Cambodian culture or identity (Ollier & Winter 2006:9).

Around 90 percent of the Cambodians are ethnic Khmer and speak Khmer as their native language. Khmer is a Sanskrit-based language and modern Khmer has many loan words from Sanskrit and Pali (Clayton 2006:7). Khmer is a grammatically simple language without verb tenses and plural forms of nouns. However, it has a very rich vocabulary for expressing relationships, status and respect. For example the personal pronoun ‘you’ in English translates into 14 different Khmer words, depending on age, sex and status of the speakers, including special forms for monks and members of the royal family (Quigley et al. 2011:165). This can pose a challenge when translating between English and Khmer (ibid). In addition to ethnic Khmer, the minority populations Chinese, Cham and Vietnamese are living in Cambodia. A bit more than 100.000 Cambodians belong to around 30 other



ethnic groups, some of which have their own languages and do not speak Khmer (Clayton 2006:7).

## 2.2 The Cambodian experience of development

In Cambodia the circumstances in which the international development cooperation began in the early 1990's were very special. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime and almost ten years of Vietnamese leadership (which coincided with the end of the Cold War) a massive intervention was made by the international community to resolve the conflicts and begin the restructuring of the Cambodian society. The UNTAC, United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, was created to set up democratic institutions and arrange for the first democratic election. This, it was hoped, would be the beginning of a more peaceful and democratic development in Cambodia (Öjendal & Lilja 2009:2). With the establishment of the UNTAC the number of international organisations increased rapidly, as in the years after the Khmer Rouge fall the international organisations had been kept from working in Cambodia both due to international sanctions and to heavy restrictions from the Vietnamese leadership (Pearson 2011:49). As an illustration Pearson writes that in 1981 around 13 international organisations (INGOs) were working inside Cambodia, whereas in 2010 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had Memorandum of Understanding with 337 INGOs (ibid:49-50).

Nee and McCallum asserts that “We cannot talk about development in Cambodia without considering the way that a variety of internal and external factors have collided and coalesced to create the trends and patterns we observe today” (2009:9). The UNTAC and the elections in 1993 are often referred to as a significant point in the recent direction of development in Cambodia. Concepts such as voluntary organisations (apart from religious groups), development, accountability democracy and grassroots driven popular movements are all very new in Cambodia (O’Leary & Nee 2001:69) and can be attributed to the influence of international actors.

The first fully Cambodian NGO was established in 1991 (Pearson 2011:53). According to Pearson a common observation was that Cambodian non-governmental organisations were extensively influenced by the examples of international organisations. As a result they adopted ideas about development that had been foreign to Cambodia so far, but without the confidence and skills to adapt and apply the concepts to the Cambodian context. This, she writes, “led to failure to value and work with traditional knowledge and customs, and to involve communities in decision making”. (ibid:55). Today there is a wide range of Cambodian organisations working with development, from small community based organisations to larger umbrella organisations working in the whole country.

When it comes to talking about development in Khmer language, Nee and O’Leary found in their study of Cambodian development practitioners that it is difficult to find words in the Khmer language that are “commonly used and understood and that embrace the conceptual meanings of the language of development” (O’Leary & Nee 2001:26). According to them the Khmer

language is struggling to keep up with the new practise that is developing in Cambodia and this can be seen in discussions between development workers where English words often slips into the conversations (ibid:26). This is a general phenomenon in several areas of the Khmer language. One of the reasons for this is that Khmer through most of the modern era has been subordinated to French (and to a lesser degree Russian and Vietnamese) and that Khmer for this reason have not been developed for many contemporary fields (Clayton 2006:104). The result is that in several areas such as economics, peace building and development there is a lack of vocabulary to refer to when working in these fields. The Khmer language is continuously growing and this is reflected in for example the lexicons of economics and peace building put together by the Cambodian Development Research Institute in order to create a common and understood language of development and peace building (CDRI 2006:i).

### Section Three – Theoretical framework

In this chapter I will present the theoretical foundation of this study. The first part discusses a theoretical framework - language of development - that links together development work and language. The second part outlines a theory - local NGOs as mediators - which looks more specifically at the influence of local development workers on development practise and language.

#### 3.1 The language of development

In order to explore the role of language in communicating knowledge, experiences and perceptions in development cooperation I will base this study on a theoretical framework often summed up as ‘languages of development’. The framework does not prove or explain more deeply why language is powerful, but starts from the assumption “that languages of development constitute an important representational field” (Arce 2000:32). This framework is made up of the work of a number of different scholars whose work is concerned with development, discourse and language. According to Rigg (2003:50) there are in general two kinds of studies that have been made on the language of development. The first category is studies made by scholars critical of development who seek to critique development through analysing the narratives it creates (see for example Crush 1995, Hobart 1993, Ferguson 1990). The second category is scholars how look at local languages of development, searching to answer the question if we are talking the same language (Rigg 2003, Arce 2000, Rigg *et al* 1999). This study falls into the second category.

The theoretical construction of languages of development is clearly a child of the trend among scholars since the 1990’s to view development as a discourse. Drawing on the work of Foucault, discourse in this context can be defined as “relationships of power/knowledge that are embedded in social institutions and practices.” (Foucault 1980:118 in Pennycook 1994:32). Seeing development as a discourse makes it possible to take distance to the

idea of development and to see it as one way of making sense of the world among many possible ways. As Benedetta Rossi writes discourse makes it possible to explore development as a “historically and culturally specific form of rationality which is inseparable from related regimes of practices and configurations of power” (Rossi 2004:1).

A fundamental perspective of the theory of languages of development is that international institutions create and actively shape the development language in order to create meaningful discourses. The language of international institutions such as the World Bank and the United Nations offices *is* in a sense the language of development. As Eade writes,

“Remarkably, it has taken only 60 years or so for Developmentspeak, a peculiar dialect of English, to become the *lingua franca* of the International Development Industry. Its pundits inhabit all the major institutions of global governance, the World Bank – as befits its role as the world’s Knowledge Bank – taking the lead in shaping the lexicon: burying outmoded jargon, authorising new terminology and permissible slippage, and indeed generating a constant supply of must-use terms and catchphrases”. (Eade 2010:viii)

In this way international institutions are seen as using and defining words in their authoritative statements and publications in order to construct discourses in which experts can identify and isolate a quantifiable number of development issues (Arce 2000:34). In this process, words such as ‘gender’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘participation’ are adopted from other fields, in this case from feminist the movement, liberation movements and alternative development streams, into the development vocabulary. As part of the development language the terms loose their political, cultural and local institutional context and become abstract concepts. “Abstract representations are used to remove ‘local’ institutional or ‘political’ distortions from the language of development” (ibid:37). Arce even goes as far as claiming that the institutional language of development is in a semantic crisis when it is contextualised, because it does not contain enough situated knowledge or information to read the diverse working arrangements of life and techno-science (ibid:44).

Alberto Arce writes that in seeing language as an important representational field in development it is important to pay attention to local languages. He does not say what one will find if one pays more attention to local languages or what kind of effects it can have, but rather that it is “significant in order to define the role of representing problems and substantial issues in the field of development studies” (ibid:39). This study is one attempt to pay more attention to a local language within the field of development studies. The theoretical framework of languages of development does not offer a hypothesis about what the study will find, but instead it offers a set of theoretical considerations from which one can explore local/situated ways of talking about development in relation to the international/institutional development language.

What is then a local language of development? Local languages of development are ‘situated’ and ‘located’ representations of development,

which means that they are linguistic representations of development that make sense to people in a specific local context (ibid:39). Speech acts of development language are mostly concerned with the performance of actions of various kinds. The implication of a local word or description of development can therefore be understood by looking at the social action that it has promoted (ibid:39). An interesting point that is made by both Rigg *et al* and Arce is that even if local languages of development are locally situated, they are still linked to the more abstract English language of development. This idea, which can be regarded as a working hypothesis, is very useful for this study since it makes it possible to investigate the relationship between the English words and Khmer equivalents. According to Rigg *et al* terms are often created by international institutions and then enter local languages. Even though the words come from the English language of development, they are not translated into a language without history. Terms such as participation are influenced by the histories that the words had before contemporary development practise.

“‘Development’ and ‘participation’ do not mean the same things in different cultures and languages. They emerge within unique cultural and historical contexts, and reflect existing power relations and hegemonies that are local or national rather than global.” (Rigg et al. 1999:600).

The choice to explore how a handful of international development concepts are understood and given meaning in Khmer is a result of that it was difficult to identify Khmer development terms that could be starting points in studying how people talk about development in Khmer. From my perspective it had been preferable to start from Khmer concepts and terms in order to discuss the significance of language to development practise. However, in the early discussions I had with people it was difficult to single out specific Khmer terms and instead people were more prone to comment on how English development terms were understood and used in Khmer and in their practical work. Since the theoretical framework includes the translation between English words and local equivalents this was a possible starting point. The terms I will look at are empowerment, gender, participation and accountability. There are several reasons for choosing these words. First of all these words were often commented upon in the initial conversations with Cambodian practitioners and academics. The Khmer term for accountability was for example pointed out as not making sense in its social meaning and gender was said to not have a Khmer translation. The validity of these claims will be discussed in the study, but this was the starting point that I had. Participation is a widely discussed concept in Cambodia since it is difficult to practice within the hierarchical structure of Cambodian society and practices of patronage.

It is not only the Cambodian terms that are worthy of discussion, but the English terms are in themselves much disputed. There is no space here for a longer discussion of each term, but it is still necessary to problematise the English concepts studied here since their abstraction is part of the complexity when translating into Khmer. The concept of participation originally comes from the attempt of Paulo Freire to transform the cultural, political and economic structures which reproduce poverty and

marginalisation (Leal 2010:91). However, in order to understand the meaning of participation today, Harris proposes that it is useful to see the use of participation as a spectrum, from purely methodological considerations to an overarching philosophy. In practise it ranges from participation being adopted because it is seen as more efficient and also most cost effective since less staff is needed if local people do the work themselves to forms of participation that are driven by the needs and goals of local people, which strengthen (empower) people, build capacity and result in long lasting desired change (Harris 2005:114-117). When the term empowerment was adopted at large by state actors and governments in connection with the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, efforts to conceptualise the term more clearly stressed that “empowerment was a *socio-political* process, that the critical operating concept within empowerment was *power*, and that empowerment was about shifts in political, social, and economic power between and across *both* individuals *and* social groups” [cursive original] (Batliwala 2010:113). However, the concept is discussed by Rigg *et al* (1999:597) as a difficult term to translate and make sense of in different cultures. The reason is first that empowerment is a term loaded with meaning, but that this meaning on the other hand is difficult to define. Secondly the term is complicated by that the concept of power can be understood in many different ways, as ‘power over’ or ‘power to’ and that is sensitive and disputed.

The word gender was originally used in the field of linguistics and has grown up in a European and specifically English tradition. Judith El-Bushra writes that it is a highly specialised term, that is poorly understood by the average English speaker and that few words for gender exist in other languages (El-Bushra 2000:56). The focus on women and gender in development processes has been adopted into mainstream development thinking through a series of approaches. From women in development (WID), to gender and development (GAD) in the late 1980’s, to the approach of gender mainstreaming in the 1990’s. Today these seem to some extent to be replaced by a focus on human rights, where gender equality is observed and implemented as a human right (Smyth 2010:150). When it comes to accountability, the original meaning of accountability is to be “called to account for one’s actions” (Mulgan 2000:555). The concept of accountability comes from western theories and experiences of public administration, where accountability has been seen as being the outcome of “answerability and enforcement”, which in the most basic terms means that a person called to account for her actions can give an answer and that this answer it met with some kind of response, depending on if the answer is satisfying or not (Fox 2010:251). Accountability is now being linked to, and seen as a key to, all forms of good governance from in anti-poverty programmes to corporate responsibility, participatory budgeting and NGO management (*ibid*:246). The term, however, is rarely defined with precision and as a result it is seen as a “complex and chameleon-like term” (Mulgan 2000:555), that “can mean all things to all people” (Fox 2010:246).

When looking closer at the meaning of the Khmer terms the theoretical framework suggests a number of factors to take into account. Firstly, in order to understand the meaning of the words and what implications they

hold for the people who use them, it can be important to understand the individual history of the word. Rigg *et al* (1999:583) argues that development and other development terms are contextually defined according to the places, people and culture where it is being applied.

Furthermore, the words need to be considered in relation to how they are linked to dominant discourses in each country. Rigg *et al*'s study of Southeast Asian languages of development (notably not Khmer) finds that the meaning of the term development is significantly shaped by the government discourses on development, and in varying degrees by international discourses of development (1999:583). This study has been very much inspired by the study made by Rigg *et al*. There is one large difference between the studies and that is that this study focuses on a civil society perspective, whereas Rigg *et al* put more focus on government development policies. In the civil society context and since there are significant differences in values between the development discourse and Cambodian culture and traditions, I think that the Khmer development words need to be understood in the meeting between discourse and culture.

What meaning terms receive in other languages is not only a question of semantics and the history of the word in the local language, but it is also an issue of how people have different ways of understanding and of resistance and of action (Rigg 2003:56). Lohmann points out that there are differences in how elite and non-elite groups understand and use language (Lohmann 1995 in Rigg 2003:57). This is also where most practitioners and scholars I talked to put emphasis. According to the Cambodian scholars and practitioners I talked to in the beginning of the project, it is important to look at how ordinary people understand development terms in comparison to how Cambodian development professionals understand them. Finally, since the development language mostly is concerned with actions, the study will look at the words in relation to the action that it has promoted. In other words the study will take into account the meaning that the terms receive when they are implemented in practise.

### 3.2 Local NGOs as mediators/translators

During the last years there has been an increasing focus on the importance of international funders forming partnerships with local NGOs in order to change the unequal power relation between these two actors. As a result of this local development workers have increasingly been recognised as being important and influential agents in the development processes. Working in local NGOs that are funded through partnerships with international funders, local development practitioners “occupy a distinctive location that places them in relationship with local communities, implementing organisations and funders” (Harris 2008:702). In this position the development workers have an important role as mediators between the different parties. They are the ones who are in a position to mediate knowledge and experiences between the local communities and the international partners and to translate each party's experience of development to the other (*ibid*). An important aspect of this is that how the development practitioners mediate

and translate depends on their understanding of poverty and development and also of their own role as agents within these processes (O'Leary and Nee 2001). Recognising that local development practitioners have this agency has made scholars refer to development workers as “brokers of development processes, who shape development in small ways and as ‘mediators between different knowledge systems’” (Harris 2008:295).

Analysing the spread of English in Cambodia, Clayton also highlights Cambodian development practitioners as playing a crucial role translating between international and local actors. From a linguistic perspective Clayton identifies bilingual Cambodian development practitioners as translating documents and having a key role for development assistance in their role as translating and interpreting “between the generally monolingual international aid community and the generally monolingual Cambodian recipients of aid.” (Clayton 2006:114). He concludes that given the contemporary trends it seems that English will continue to be the first language of international development organisation working in Cambodia and that development cooperation will continue to be essentially dependent on bilingual Cambodians who can mediate (ibid:115).

The success of the strategy with partnership in shaping genuine partnerships and in diverting power structures can be discussed. Indeed there are a number of studies drawing on experiences in different development contexts globally that would agree with Harrison's claim that the new terminology and processes of partnership have obscured rather than changed inequitable power relations (Harrison 2002:587). Still this does not significantly change the role of local development practitioners. As Harris shows in her study, the result is instead that “local practitioners are devising their own strategies to meet local development goals, acting as unacknowledged mediators so long as there is not open communication and mutual respect within development relationships” (Harris 2008:701).

How things are represented in the language of development is the outcome of how cultural practises, ideas, concepts and distributions of meaning are enacted and experienced by different actors (Arce 2000:32). Local development practitioners are as identified above important actors in the development processes who implement development work and translate the experiences of international and local actors between each other. The theory of local NGOs as mediators of development will be used to follow up on the role of the local NGO studied in shaping the language of development.

## Section Four - Methodology

This chapter presents the methodology used, the ethical considerations involved in the study as well as a discussion of the sources used.

### 4.1 Making a case study

This study uses a case study approach in order to look at how language is used and words are given meaning in a specific real-life context. The case can be defined as the translation of development language, involving how English terms are translated into Khmer and how in Khmer they are then used and redefined and given meaning. This case is operationalised by looking at one specific project in Cambodia and how different actors linked to this project translate, give meaning to and use development concepts.

Making a case study made it possible to combine discussions about meanings of terms with real life observations of what meanings the terms gained in practise. This was seen as very important by the Cambodian scholars and development practitioners I talked to, since they felt that without looking at how the terms were practised it was not possible to understand fully what they mean. Yin defines a case study as an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context.” (Yin 2009:18). Hence the case study method made it possible to include theoretical discussions with practical observations, as well as including the perspectives of several different actors.

Furthermore the aim of the study is to contribute to the discussion about the important role of language in development cooperation. The scholars working with the theoretical framework of language of development stress that “it is important to explore the ways in which development practitioners/experts and local actors articulate their languages of development, and how far these resonate with each other or create a cacophony of divergent and discordant messages.” (Arce 2000:32). Whereas it is commonly agreed that it is not desirable to make generalisations from case studies, this case study therefore has the potential to contribute with valuable insights to the existing theoretical framework (Yin 2012:18).

#### *A gender project*

The organisation studied is a Cambodian non-governmental youth organisation that was founded in November 1992. They have their main office in Phnom Penh and branch offices in eight provinces in Cambodia. They mainly work with children and youth in the ages between 12-35 years. But they also work with a secondary target group defined as “Citizens who play an influential role on youth and children, especially teachers, monks, parents, local authorities and people in decision making positions” (organisation’s website<sup>1</sup>).

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<sup>1</sup> For ethical reasons I have chosen to de-identify the organisation studied and because of this the references to their reports and their webpage are not included in the list of references, since this would reveal the name of the organisation.



Since 1994 the organisation has a special program for working with women. As a part of this program they have a gender project which aims to promote and increase women's participation in decision-making processes on the local level. This project is implemented in five different provinces: Kompong Cham, Takeo, Siem Reap, Prey Veng and Svay Rieng. This is the project studied in this fieldwork.

The reason for choosing a youth organisation was that from the beginning I wanted to include three organisations in the case study. In this trio I included one youth organisation. Because of limited time and also capacity to handle the data, I decreased the number of organisations to only one. The youth organisation was the first organisation that was contacted, but they also expressed a real interest in the study. They proved to be an interesting case study because it is a truly Khmer organisation in the sense that they have only local staff and that they have branch offices in most of the provinces where they work, which gives them a much better position to be connected to the situation around the communities than organisations that work through out-reach projects might be.

Special for the organisation is that the main donor for the women's project is a Swedish umbrella organisation that changed their staff in Cambodia to local staff in 2008. Consequently, the donor of the project studied is one of the few international development partners in Cambodia where the staff is local and speaks Khmer. In the youth organisation this is seen as a very positive change. What the effects of this change are, which in reality means that part of the translation process of words is moved from being between the international organisation and local NGO to being between the main office and local office of the international organisation, have not been specifically addressed in this study. However, in relation to the questions of this study it is a very interesting topic for further study.

#### 4.2 Working with Cambodian students

In the early period of the project I presented the study to the master students of development studies at the public university Royal University of Phnom Penh in order to see if anyone was interested in conducting the study with me. There I met Dara who was working fulltime as the Language and Cross-Cultural Coordinator for American Peace Corps and studied the Master program in Development studies at Royal University and Sorphorn who was studying a Bachelor in Khmer literature at Royal University and worked part time as a English teacher for Khmer students. They were both interested in the study and have taken part in much of the process, from designing the study, to conducting interviews, translating the material and making a preliminary analysis.

Making this study together with Cambodian students has been very important, since one of the main issues in this study is how Cambodians make sense of English development concepts. Since I am not fluent in Khmer and have spent in total only one year in Cambodia, I do not have the understanding of Khmer language and culture to interpret this. As Rigg

*et al* writes about the study of languages of development, it is easy to draw conclusions without thoroughly understanding the true significance.

“Terms such as ‘development’ and ‘participation’ are often coined in the West, translated into local languages (or associated with local equivalents), and then transposed onto the developmental landscape. Western researchers and consultants (often not conversant in the local language) may then find such terms being translated back to them. The assumption, in more than a few cases, is that these languages of development are comparable” (Rigg *et al.* 1999:582).

Understanding what development concepts means in a local Cambodian context entails understanding the terms from a different cultural framework than my own. There have been many challenges in this fieldwork and the largest one has been to be aware of my cultural perspective and to not label and understand events and findings based on my Swedish and European culture and education and make selective interpretations (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000:204). Working with Dara and Sorphorn has meant that I could check and verify my interpretations with them. In methodological terms we have been working with a continuing discussion between an emic (from within the culture) and etic (from outside the culture) perspective. Since the beginning of the project period until the preliminary analysis, we have continuously discussed findings and questions and thereby combined our different perspectives into the analysis. My hope is also that the study has provided an interesting opportunity for them to study something that they are interested in and that maybe my questions have made them consider and learn new things about their language that they did not know before.

#### 4.3 Data collection

The study draws on a rich variety of sources such as open-ended interviews, semi-structured interviews, observations and informal meetings in other non-governmental organisations, the university and libraries and every day life in Cambodia. To some extent I have used participatory observation and field notes as well as secondary sources such as reports and documentation from the organisation studied and other research from Cambodia.

The variety of sources has been important in order to cross-check and verify the information gained from one source with another (Yin 2012). This has been especially important because the study focus on a language, since languages in general gain their power and influence through being commonly agreed upon and shared. The aim has therefore been to reaffirm the findings using other sources, triangulating, in order to create as valid descriptions as possible (ibid:13). The wide span of the study in relation to the small size of the project made it challenging to keep a balance between including enough concepts to get an interesting perspective on the language and on the other hand collecting enough material on each part in order to be able to cross-check the information. As a result I have had to choose to not

include some information in the analysis, since there were too few sources to verify it.

### *Interviews*

In the beginning of the fieldwork I met with three persons who have experience from the development field in Cambodia; the program director of the Graduate program of Development studies at Royal University, a PhD student making a comparative study of education and development in post-conflict Cambodia and Uganda and the gender advisor for a Swedish umbrella organisation (that is funding the youth organisation studied here) in order to get feedback on the study. These meetings can be described as open-ended interviews (or also non-structured interviews) since they took the form of conversations where the aim was to find out how the interviewed “construct reality and think about situations” instead of just finding answers to my specific questions (Yin 2012:5). Of course this aim was explicit in the meetings since I was asking these persons about how they saw the issue that I wanted to study. As Yin writes, insights in how people construct reality can provide important insights into the case and these insights can gain even further value if the people as key persons in the organisations, communities or small groups being studied (ibid: 5). The opinions and advises of these people therefore formed an important basis for how the study was designed.

The study builds on a series of interviews. In total twelve interviews were made with commune council members, the organisation’s youth networks, the organisation’s staff, the management team as well as the three persons described above. The interviews took in general between 30 minutes to one hour.

Two semi-structured interviews with in total 5 different commune council members responsible for women’s affairs in their communes, representing five different provinces. All representatives were women and had a close cooperation with the youth organisation and their networks. It is important to note that the commune council representatives had been working closely with organisation for several years and that one of the interviews were conducted during a 2-day workshop with the organisation in Phnom Penh, so they were very engaged and experienced in these issues.

Two semi-structured interviews with the organisation’s youth networks all participating in the gender project and organising activities related to gender questions in the communes. In total we interviewed 6 youth from four different provinces.

One semi-structured interview with all the staff of women’s project, in total 5 staff representing and being responsible for the women’s project in five different provinces. All staff for the women’s project were women.

One semi-structured interview with the Chief of the Women’s unit in the organisation and one semi-structured interview with the Vice President of the organisation. One interview with the project coordinator for Kompong

Cham province. One semi-structured interview with the director of another organisation called Women Peace Makers Cambodia.

All interviews, except for the ones with the youth organisation's management, were made in Khmer by Dara and Sorphorn. The questions were prepared in advance and translated into Khmer and during the interviews it was Dara or Sorphorn that led the interview, sometimes translating directly for me to make sure that it was going in the direction intended. My role was mostly observing and listening as good as I could. The reason why we chose to make the interviews in Khmer and to not translate questions and answers between English and Khmer during the interviews was partly because it would have made the interview long-winded, but most importantly because it would have put us in the trap of translating the Khmer answers into English and it was exactly this problematic dynamic between the languages that we wanted to study. Of course we faced the same problem later, translating the recorded interviews into English (which was necessary for me to be able to analyse the material in Sweden), but then we had more time to discuss and reflect upon how to translate.

The interviews were made in Phnom Penh and Kompong Cham province. Almost all interviews were made in connection to various scheduled activities such as an internal workshop, a network campaign and a network meeting. The management team were interviewed in the office in Phnom Penh.

### *Observation*

The study also builds on observations from a network meeting with the provincial leaders in Kompong Cham, a network campaign for women's security in Kompong Cham, a 2-day consultation workshop for the organisation's gender project as well as the presentation of organisation's annual internal evaluation for 2011. As I've been working in a youth organisation in Cambodia before these situations were all very familiar to me and this was a challenge because it was more natural for me to become a part of the situation and feel like a part of the organisation than to observe its work. This made me miss some good opportunities to ask questions and learn more and after reflecting on this it became easier to focus on my role as observer. Notes made from these occasions are part of the material.

### *Secondary material*

Part of the material is the organisation's annual reports, success stories and a monthly report that has been translated from Khmer to English for this study.

## 4.4 Data analysis

Once the interviews were completed they were translated from Khmer to English. Because of time pressure it was not possible to transcribe the

interviews in Khmer and then translate them into English. Instead I sat together with Dara and Sorphorn and translated them during a number of mornings and afternoons. Going through each interview all of us individually listened to the recorded interviews and took notes. Afterwards Dara and Sorphorn translated the interviews step by step to me who wrote it down in English. Since what we were interested in was the perceptions, ideas and experiences expressed by the interviewees rather than the exact wording they used we translated the interviews as summaries instead of word by word. The key terms in Khmer were not translated, but written phonetically with the roman alphabet. This was important in order to know exactly which Khmer words that were used and consequently to be able to see how these words were used and what they meant for the different people participating.

After the material was translated we made a preliminary analysis based on our impressions, findings and experiences. The preliminary analysis was recorded and has been very important for me to return to after my arrival in Sweden, in order to remember and check my ideas with my Cambodian partners.

The fact that we did not transcribe the interviews can be seen as a limitation in the data handling. On the other hand, because of the cross-cultural nature of the study it is also a strength to be able to discuss the translations between different native speakers. A further strength is that the people who translated were the same people who conducted the interviews and they had a good understanding of the study and its implications. We could therefore combine our observations from the interviews when doing the translations.

After coming back to Europe I coded the material. In first hand I used topic coding, where I coded all the interviews and other material according to topics such as “the meaning of empowerment” and “differences between linguistic meaning and meaning in practise”. When coding I kept the passage that was interesting in its context, which meant that a coded piece could be between two to eight or more sentences. Many passages were coded several times under different topics. Topic coding is about “putting the data ‘where they belong’” (Richards 2009:100). In other words it is essentially about reviewing the material and allocating passages according to topics. Richards (ibid) writes that this often is a time consuming and boring task, but for me it was exciting since I started to code relatively late in the project and by then it was both a relief and interesting to see how the data spread out in categories. These codes then helped me to “move up from the data” to thinking about the topics in relation to each other and to start the process of analysing the data in relation to the theoretical framework. The early analysis generated analytical codes such as “contextualisation through examples” and “ambition in the choice of words” and this process then continued as I started writing up the thesis.

#### 4.5 Ethics

Valuing the importance of informed consent all interviews and focus groups discussions began with explaining the study to the participants. Informed consent is when “a potential participant freely and with full understanding of the research agrees to be a part of the project (Scheyvens *et al* 2003:142). Instead of giving the information sheet to the participants, Dara or Sorphorn explained the content of the sheet in Khmer. The reason for this was that the information sheet was written in English and also that not all Khmer people are comfortable with reading. This information explained briefly the focus and the aim of the project and stressed that the participants were free to choose if they wanted to participate and that they could withdraw at any time. The participants were asked if they were comfortable with having the interview recorded and alerted on that they could ask to stop the recording if they wished. The participants were ensured anonymity as a rule and it was explained that the study would be presented to the local organisation and made available on my university’s webpage. This procedure was more informal in the open-ended interviews with the organisation’s management and with other directors and scholars since these interviews often took place as a result of discussing the study earlier and since these interviews were not recorded.

In the interviews with the staff, the youth networks and community people it was sometimes difficult to explain the project since it builds on a number of theoretical and philosophical assumptions that were too theoretical to explain. On the other hand, the study seemed to make sense to most people based on their personal experiences. Often I felt very welcome and some development practitioners expressed surprise and appreciation for my interest in doing a study like this one.

A problem that is difficult to get around is the power relations between researcher and research participants. It is in the nature of much Development studies research that the researcher will be in positions of power in relation to the participants. These power imbalances can be both in terms of access to money and education and other resources and in terms of perceived differences of the researcher as being superior (ibid:149). As a white woman with university education, acting and looking similar to many of the personnel of international NGOs in Cambodia, I was probably perceived and received as an influential person. This was shown by that I was invited to make comments or small speeches during meetings and public events. Even if I was not prepared and knew much less about the subject than most people present, I was perceived as having knowledge. At the end of one focus group one commune council representative also asked me which organisation I was representing. This unequal relationship might have caused people to agree to participate in the study even if they had no interest in it or also to answer questions even if they felt that the interview was taking too long time. This problem is exacerbated by Khmer culture, where people avoid to loose face or to cause other to loose face. Working together with two Cambodians can have helped to make this situation more neutral since they were not always talking directly to me and one of my Khmer counterparts were very experienced in working with foreigners in

the local communities and the second counterpart was a young woman like me. The situation was also made lighter by that I was the one who mispronounced words and was asking about the meanings of things. Furthermore most of the interviews and activities were made in connection to the organisations already scheduled activities in order to minimize the time and energy that we took from the participants' already busy schedule.

## Section Five – Results and analysis

This chapter is divided into three parts. In the first part I will analyse the terms as part of situated languages, looking at how the words are understood and used by scholars, donor, development practitioners and well as ordinary people, which in this case are youths and local commune council members. In the second part I will argue for that the staff of the organisation studied can be seen as a mediator or translator of development, in accordance with the theory of development practitioners as mediators of development, and look at what influence this has on language. In the third part I will combine the findings previously presented to answer the main question of what the importance of language is in development cooperation.

### 5.1 Tracing the terms into Khmer

#### *Participation*

The Khmer word for participation is *gaa joal roum* and it is a word that has existed for a long time in the Khmer vocabulary. Since the first elections held in Cambodia in 1993 the word has been redefined in the context of international peace, reconstruction and later development work to signify the concept of participation. Among all the practitioners I talked to it was seen as a simple translation; *gaa joal roum* means participation. However, the Khmer word itself has a long history and according to Jenny Knowles, “participation has transformed in tandem to the tumultuous Cambodian political landscape since Cambodian independence in 1953” (Knowles 2007:741).

The term for participation is to some extent shaped by the history of the word *gaa joul roum*. In her dissertation study on the concept of participation, Knowles found for example that some practitioners experience that the word is confusing for people and that the difference between participatory decision making and the collective decision making that was used by the Khmer rouge is difficult to for people to grasp (ibid:748). During the Khmer Rouge time, *joal roum*, received a negative meaning as it was used by the Khmer Rouge leaders. The phrase “*joal roum jiemuoy Angka*” can be directly translated as “participate with the Khmer Rouge leadership” (ibid:747). People were forced to work for the Khmer Rouge, to live together and share.

Looking at the history of the term it also becomes clear that the concept of participation that is promoted today is not a concept drawing on Khmer culture and traditions. Rigg *et al* (1999) argues that it is important to understand development words in relation to the dominant discourse promoted in the country (1999:582). In the case of participation, however, I want to argue that it is important to understand the term by looking at the meeting between development discourse on participation and traditional Khmer culture. The Cambodian society builds on a strong hierarchy and values of respect, authority and consensus. In this hierarchy decisions are traditionally handed down from above and leaders are seen as having the legitimacy to make decisions which are to be followed (O’Leary & Nee 2001:63). The traditions of this hierarchy are completely opposite to the philosophy of participation, which aims to shift power to empower the one’s who are powerless or, in the weakest version of participation, to invite people to contribute with their ideas (Harris 2005:119). Seeing this apparent conflict in values, O’Leary and Nee pose the question how participatory, bottom-up processes work in a society where top-down is the norm? (2001:63).

The unfamiliarity with the concept of participation was discussed by Yin Dara, who participated in making this study. According to him, instead of saying participation, practitioners can make the intention more clear by saying *mok joub knie* (come meet each other), but it is still complicated by the culture of patronage.

“... so sometimes people still, even if the word is the same as in English [...] but people still sometimes they don’t understand the concept of why I need to go why they don’t just come to my house and tell me about what they want to tell us, you know, they don’t understand about sharing ideas, exchange ideas. (Yin Dara in preliminary analysis)

The experience of the youth organisation studied seems to differ somewhat from the general experiences that are discussed in literature about participation in Cambodia and that was expressed by Cambodian development practitioners more generally. As a youth organisation their work is driven by a specific discourse on participation which can be seen in their organisational description:

“Youth participation is a special mechanism to build a democratic society. Through national and international interest, youths have to try their best to join all activities and show responsibility for their families, communities, nations and indeed the world.” (organisation’s website)

The quote above suggests that participation means to ‘join’ and to ‘show responsibility’. The name of the project studied in this study included the words “Promoting and increasing women’s participation” and in fact the majority of the organisation’s project’s names involved the word participation. Since languages of development mainly are concerned with performance of various actions (Arce 2000:39), it is interesting to look at what kind of actions that are part of the project promoting women’s participation in decision making. There seems to be three main activities promoting participation, which are: forming networks, conducting activities



in the communities and participating in the commune council meetings. An important mechanism for youth participation in the organisation is that the youth form networks in their communities. In 2010, ten networks were created with each having around 20 members (annual report 2010). In these networks the youth then make activities ranging from arranging meetings between community members and local authorities on various issues, to making campaigns and involving in projects in the community. One of the main activities of the network members is to attend the commune council meetings in their communes and some networks have also succeeded in cooperating with the commune council as local contractors where they carry out projects in cooperation with the commune councils.

“For the experiences, if our group wants to do a campaign, we will do the research to find what is the problem that happen most in the commune?”  
(youth network member, Kompong Cham)

If the older generations often are hesitant to involve deeply in projects and having more exchange with the local authorities, this was not something that was echoed by the youth in the networks. To the question why she participated in the women’s project, one young network leader answered like this:

“The first reason is to understand about the society and have the opportunities to involve in the society and of course we can make communication with commune council and also have workshop with province leader level. Moreover, what we did can help our society” (youth network member, Kompong Cham)

A young man who had been active in a network for three years was asked how he felt when he first joined the activities. He said that:

“[...] when I become the youth network member I participated in developing my community such as I involve in educating local people about law, human rights and participatory in community. Example I have promoted local people to join the meeting in the commune office and meeting in the health center for people to get health service. So I am very proud and happy that I can help for people to go and get service” (youth network member, Kompong Cham)

The challenges to participation discussed above do not seem to apply to the same degree to the youth organisation. Instead another challenge was identified, namely that in traditional Khmer society youth are not seen as experienced and knowledgeable enough to be listened to and to take part in decision-making (UN 2009:77, Kim 2012:82, organisation’s webpage). In the UN youth situation analysis they talk about an “age-hierarchy” and a “knowledge-hierarchy” which limits the possibilities for young people to express their views. The age-hierarchy demands respect for the elders and the authorities and the knowledge-hierarchy involves that older people perceives that youth do not have the experience and knowledge and should listen to the more experienced and mature members of the community (UN 2009). As a result, part of the organisation’s work is recognised as being to create the conditions in which youth can actively participate. As they write,

they strive towards “the empowerment of young people by government and other stakeholders with the principles that encourage youth participation and recognize youth's roles and work.” (organisation’s webpage). This involves giving capacity building to commune council members on the decentralisation process and working with them to make them accept and value youth participation.

Furthermore, the organisation seems to have considerable success in their work to promote youth participation. As a result of the youth’s engagement with the commune councils, some youth have been nominated to participate in the Cambodian People’s Party as “leader of youth movement of commune” (annual report 2010). In the annual report the staff is recommended to:

“have some ideas to brainstorm with the network members who get the invitation. There are several ideas such as: help the network to be ready in participate in the position, observe if the network can continue to stand for vote at the commune level, help the network team to continue their initiative activities and to discuss about their neutral image and the cooperation with the ex-member.” (annual report 2010)

So far the discussion has focused on how participation is understood and implemented by development practitioners, but how do the youth see participation? In the study I did not ask this question directly, but the findings in the interview still seem to give some idea. Talking about how they invite villagers to their activities, one youth said:

“When we do campaigns or workshop they, sometimes, in the public stage they dare to ask and in campaigns we let them understand. Sometimes, some people don’t like to talk much, and they like listening. So when we do the campaigns, they can see and understand us.” (youth network member, Kompong Cham).

This brief quote is interesting because it shows that the youth are experiencing the same issues that are often experienced by development practitioners and that was discussed above. About the participation the same girl said:

“The project that we doing, is mainly focus on the important of participation of people. Because like this -if they don’t join with us, we will not be successful no matter what. So our biggest goal is that the participation of the people in any works and of course even we do on many project, but if they don’t work with us, they still don’t understand” (youth network member, Kompong Cham)

Here it is possible to make a parallel to what O’Leary and Nee found in their study on development practitioners. In their study they write that Cambodian practitioners often view participation as necessary for the project to be successful, but that more attention is given to the number of people participating than the how active they are and if they are meaningfully involved in decision making. They quote a development practitioner saying “Participation is an important factor for success – if

the people do not join, the project will fail. If we are to develop them we cannot succeed without participation. What the people do not know or understand we will add” (O’Leary & Nee 2001:42).

The girl in the quote above continued by saying that people who participate learn how to use public services, such as the services of the commune hall and the health care services. The project described here is hence very practically orientated, to practical services that people need but are not comfortable in using yet. Nevertheless, it is still clear from the quote that the two girls interviewed saw participation as important because they wanted to teach people something rather than seeing the other people as having knowledge to contribute with. So, even if the youth practise participation in the sense of actively analysing the situation in the community, finding solutions and putting them into practise through small-scale projects, the youth themselves seemed to view participation in a more limited sense.

### *Empowerment*

The word empowerment is often translated into Khmer as *p’doll omnach* (to give power) or *p’doll sit omnach* (provide rights and power). The former term is for example a term that NGOs commonly use in their reports (Yin Dara). I have found little literature on the concept of empowerment in Cambodia. However, many development practitioners said that they are not comfortable with using the word *omnach* (power).

A senior program officer from Forum Syd in Cambodia said that is better to translate empowerment as *pung rung samatapheap* (strengthen the capability) than to translate ‘power’ literally to *omnach*, because she found that *omnach* cannot capture the real meaning of the word empowerment (personal communication Ith Pov). The director of Women Peacemakers Cambodia stated that *p’doll omnach* is not a suitable translation of empowerment, because *omnach* refers to the power of the government. She said that using *omnach* in project activities creates tension as the government feels that this word should be reserved for them and that using this word in the sense of giving power to someone can mean contesting the political power. According to her, people participating in the activities can also be uncomfortable with the word *omnach* (interview 12). In the context of the women’s project the chief of the organisation’s women’s unit explained that *pung rung sit omnach satrey* (strengthen the rights and power of women) is the right translation for empowerment, but that sometime it is not possible to use this word because it affects the third person which are the men. She said that even the government and the Ministry of Women’s Affairs need to find the soft words to express their policies. Furthermore, she said that it is difficult to find the words that do not make people angry.

“If you use *pung rung sit omnach satrey* men feel threatened in their position in the home and this in some cases leads to domestic violence. When we say ‘empowerment women’ it really affects the husband”. (Chief of Women’s unit)

The voices presented above represent the general opinions of development practitioners interviewed about empowerment and after discussing the concept of empowerment with different people, the discussions landed in the question if there is a sense of struggle for power within the concept of empowerment? The chief of the women's unit answered after a moment's reflection that she thought that empowerment really involves a sense of struggle for power because it is a question about for example decision-making in the family. In her view the empowerment of women really affect the position of men in the household (interview 11).

In their overview over development words in Southeast Asian languages, Rigg *et al* writes that the concept of empowerment is problematic since it involves the concept of power. Power is conceptualised differently in different cultures. To some people it means “power ‘over others - of men over women, or the wealthy over the poor, or of one ethnic group over another” (1999:597). To other people power can be seen as ‘power to’ make decisions or to act or as ‘power with’ or ‘power within’ (O’Leary & Nee 2001:38). The Cambodian people have extremely negative experiences of power (Pearson 2011:43). In their study O’Leary and Nee found that most of the development practitioners described power as something negative and that power most commonly was conceptualised as ‘power over’. This meant for example that a powerful person was described as someone who uses his power over others, forcing people to do what he wants and never listens to others (2001:37) As an illustration a person such as the *achar* (Buddhist layman) is seen as having ‘something’ because people respect him and depend on him for ceremonies and advise. But to say that the *achar* is powerful would have negative implications and the practitioners instead described the ‘power’ of the *achar* as he being a ‘good person’. Similarly women who are popular or influential within the community are described as ‘virtuous women’ rather than powerful (ibid:38). Given the negative connotations of power, empowerment is also linked to the notion of giving another ‘power over’ which is perceived as a potential threat to the stability of the social order (ibid:54).

Notable is that at the same time as some interviewees were hesitant to translate the ‘power’ in ‘empowerment’ into *omnach* in Khmer, in general they did not find it problematic to use the English word empowerment. The director of Women Peacemakers explained that if you use the English word, then the meaning and the context is clear (interview 12). This might suggest, as Batliwala writes in her account over empowerment, that empowerment has been mainstreamed to the extent that it has lost its original transformative power (Batliwala 2010:111), whereas the Khmer term is still powerfully loaded and reaching struggles that are going on in the Cambodian society.

In his theoretical discussion about local languages of development, Alberto Arce points out that speech acts of development languages are directly related to the performance of actions of various kinds. Because of this, linguistic representations make sense to the people who use them and also to researchers in terms of the social action that they are promoting (2000:39). This idea is very relevant when discussing empowerment in Khmer, because

instead of bringing in the word power, there are several other ways of conceptualising empowerment in Khmer that are related to how the concept is implemented and what the outcome is hoped to be. The director of Women Peacemakers said that she preferred to say *pung rung satamapheap* (capacity building) or to say ‘build trust and good relationship’. According to her there are many words for empowerment depending on which aspect of it one refers to. Building trust and relationships is one aspect, but in order to empower she thinks that it is essential to build trust in the community. Meas Nee has explained the seeming passivity of Cambodian people, what one of the youth organisation’s staff described as that the communities have their own principles and that he sees a need to “wake them up”, with a lack of trust between people. Nee means that mistrust between people and their leaders prevents the creation of a sense of safety, so that people simply follow, as to do something on your own initiative might have unwanted consequences (Pearson 2011:42). Building on this Pearson writes that before people can feel safe to explore change, trust and safe spaces need to be established (ibid:43). In this sense ‘building trust and relations’ can be an important first step in an empowering process.

Talking to participants and staff in the youth organisation’s women’s project empowerment was also expressed as daring to speak. One commune council member who have been working with women’s issues since the early 1980’s described the change she sees when working with women;

“The change is that at first they did not want to share their problem they felt scared to talk about those things and when we had a meeting they did not understand and just sat and listened. But when we encourage them to participate in the meeting, to talk about their sadness and their problems, they are, now, daring to share what they think and involve in such activities more and more.” (Commune council member, Kompong Cham)

Another example (among many) comes from the organisation’s success stories that are attached to their annual reports. A woman who participated in the project described her experience;

“Before, I was a shy woman, which not brave to show my opinions, ideas even discussing with someone. I was a silent and listening person. After I joined with their activities- women training, meetings, workshops, campaigns., I felt so more brave and started active person with having more times to discussed and shared my ideas in the training day as well as I transferred my knowledge to the community groups.” (annual report 2010)

There is a significant focus on the change from being a silent and listening person to being active and sharing ideas and knowledge. In their study on how Cambodian development practitioners perceive development values, O’Leary and Nee similarly concluded that most commonly empowerment was described in terms of ‘daring to speak’, but that there was little clarity regarding what exactly people are being empowered to speak about or the strategies to promote empowerment (2001:37).

## *Gender*

Before gender was adopted in Khmer NGOs translated gender as *pet* which means *sex* in Khmer, but this doesn't seem to work so well and now it is rarely heard (interview 4). In the opening speech of one of the youth organisation's consultation workshop for their gender project, the organisation's president said that "Gender and the women promotion are words that they have known for almost 20 years, but it still needs more work." A common metaphor that I met in almost all conversations about gender was the idea that men and women are like the right and left hand. As an argument for gender equality, the interviewees then argued that it is possible to do everything with only the right hand, but that it will be faster and more productive to use both hands (interview 10, 6 and 8). Often the metaphor was used to motivate that women should be included as an actor in the society outside of the household.

"The thing is that our idea is that since the beginning, every country when there is no participant from women, it seem like our two hands, if we use only one hand we, of course can work with that, but it's slow and if we both work together, help each other, the work can go faster. So this means that they don't leave the resource of women useless, they have to make use of it in the society, because women are also part of humanity" (commune council member)

However, it was also used in the opposite way, suggesting that men should share the responsibility in the household with women.

"when we talk about gender it refers to responsibility between men and women, for example the sharing of the housework. So men should not think that this is the women's work and that men should not do it and this is our work, we should do only this. However, we should join together to work because we share the same profit for both men and women in the family". (staff women's project)

A more simple way of referring to gender in Khmer is *srei nung broh* which means literally 'men and women'. There is a concern among some of the practitioners that people take gender to mean only women. They see it as important that the communities understand that gender not only refers to women, because if people mistake it to mean promoting only women it can lead to domestic violence. For example when women who come home from training on gender refuse to cook because she knows that she has rights. If the man is not involved in the process this creates problems (interview 10).

The chief of the organisation's women's unit explained that the practical meaning of gender depends upon the situation of the society.

"Gender does not mean sex, gender means everything around us. Participation and even decision-making. Gender issues include thinking about control, ownership and asset [...] Today in Cambodia there is a need for female participation and access to decision making, therefore this is what gender means in Cambodian today. " (Chief of the women's unit)

As a proof she added that gender might refer mostly to men one day, if they lack power and influence. However, she also said that in the trainings on gender they need to take time to explain, discuss and give examples. In more easy terms she explained gender as “decision-making, husband and wife helping each other in the home and taking care of the children together (interview 11). In general the staff of the women’s project as well as the commune council representatives agreed that there is a limited understanding among people about what gender means. One commune council member expressed that people only know the meaning that “what men can do, women can also do” (interview 6).

According to O’Leary and Nee’s study on Cambodian development practitioners, the concept of gender is the only concept in the development discourse that is directly in opposition to Cambodian culture and traditions (2001:101). Gender as a concept clearly comes from outside Cambodia and this is underlined by the fact that gender has not been translated, but instead has been adopted in its English form. The vice president of the organisation reckoned that the term gender started to be used after the elections in 1993. The discussion about gender can therefore be said to come out of a process of making sense of the concept, both as a new concept and in regards as to how it will be related to the Cambodian society.

As a youth association, the vice president perceived that the youth understand and adopt the concept of gender faster than other parts of the Cambodian society. A commune council member having a seemingly close relation with the youth network in her commune said that whereas the old generation have a limited understanding of gender, it is the opposite for the youth. According to her gender as a topic has been integrated into the national curriculum in the schools and this has promoted youth’s understanding of the concepts.

The day before a network campaign of women’s security I interviewed one of the members of the youth network in Kompong Cham. She described their activities;

Our project to promote gender is that tomorrow, the 26<sup>th</sup>, we will do the campaign called the ‘White Bow’ under the topic “Stopping domestic violence and the racism against women”. For this we have the messages and to put on the white bow on to the people and explain them that what men can do women can also do and for some things men cannot do the same as women such as pregnancy, feeding the baby with the milk and so on. We beg that they could give a chance for women and that men should share the responsibility in doing housework and do not think that this is women’s work or this men’s work and that to give the opportunity to the women to join in the society. (Youth network, Kompong Cham)

### *Accountability*

The Khmer word for accountability is *kanakney pheap*. It is a newly invented word that could not be found in Khmer dictionaries before the

1990s (Kim 2012:129). The concept of accountability is generally seen as new in Cambodia. For example, the senior program officer of Forum Syd explained to me that whereas development is not a new concept in Cambodia, the concepts of accountability and transparency are new to the thinking about development (personal communication Ith Pov). Some people suggest on the other hand that even if the Khmer word for accountability is new and the concept of accountability today is implemented in relation to development in ways that never have existed in Cambodia before, a practise of accountability can be said to have existed in the Cambodian society for a long time. According to the Cambodian PhD student Un Leang, in the past times the activity of building pagodas had a clear sense of social accountability. In the past when people in the community contributed with money and resources to build a pagoda or renovate parts of a pagoda, after the work was finished the monks would account for how much each person had given and how it had been spent (interview 3). This view is supported by Kim who, also discussing villager's contribution of money and resources to the building of pagodas, contends that the leadership from the pagoda that made it possible to generate these resources built on "popular/voluntary participation, a strong sense of ownership and responsibility of all members of the pagoda committee, as well as respect, trustworthiness, transparency, autonomy and empowerment." (Kim 2012:53). In this sense the relation between the monks and the local people can arguably be said to have built on a sense of social accountability in traditional Cambodia. This link between *kanakney pheap* and the relation between monks and lay people in past times were rarely made by the people I interviewed.

Among the practitioners and scholars that I interviewed the term *kanakney pheap* was seen as a difficult term to work with because the term by itself implies accountability only in a financial sense and not in a social sense. This point was made in almost all conversations about development and seen as a problem since it made the term confusing. Looking at the term it is understandable because *kanakney pheap* is a literal translation of the English construction of account (*kanakney*) and ability (*pheap*), which means 'status' or 'being'. Put together the terms are understood as "status or being of accounts" (Pak *et al* 2007:1). Nevertheless, after making this point the interviewees went on to explain that in reality the concept involves both financial and social accountability and that in practise the term is linked to transparency and good governance. A development worker who previously had been a monk for eight years and studied Pali and Sanskrit stressed that *kanakney pheap* refers to accountability in both a financial and political sense and that it involves 'responsibility' and 'no secrets' (interview 4). Some practitioners also explained that it was important to take time and explain and give examples for people to understand its full meaning (interview 11 and personal communication Ith Pov).

Rigg *et al* has pointed out that in order to understand what a term means it is important to look at how it is linked to the dominant development discourse in each country (1999:583). Accountability in the way it is promoted in Cambodia is essentially about how the government institutions exercises power and act and interact with the citizens. The dominant discourse on



accountability therefore is focused on the government institutions. Here accountability is linked to much larger democratisation and decentralisation processes which aims to bring the authorities closer to the population and make it more responsive and accountable to the needs of the people (Pak *et al* 2007:22). However, in these processes the civil society is recognised as having an important role to play. The civil society including individual actors, media and organisations such as NGOs are seen as playing important roles for demanding accountability and actively building closer relations between local government institutions through participation and advocacy (*ibid*:27). I would say that it is through this role that the youth organisation understands the concept of accountability. In addition, the organisation has their own discourse or approach on how to strengthen democracy in Cambodia. Their work builds on the principle that “youth participation is a special mechanism to build a democratic society” (organisation’s website). This approach matches very well with the role given to civil society in the official discourses and decentralisation and social accountability, so the organisation’s understanding of accountability is arguably also shaped by their own principle of youth participation.

In fact most practitioners that I talked to did not explain the term more elaborately, but stressed the need to look at how accountability is practised. In the organisation’s annual report of for 2010, the implementation of accountability is summarised like this:

“The social accountability has been heard and takes action by the youth and government, especially to pave the way for close relation of dialogues and cooperation” (annual report 2010).

The youth networks conduct several different activities that can improve relations and increase dialogues with the local authorities. One of the most common activities of the networks was to participate in the commune council meetings. A large part of the youth active in the networks reported that they regularly joined the meetings. Together with the organisation’s staff the networks also arranged meetings with the local authorities to present the activities that they were making in their communities. During my stay I participated in a meeting between youth networks in Kompong Cham and the provincial leaders in which the youth networks presented their work and achievements over the last year. These activities are related to a more general aim of promoting youth as important agents in the society, but as a part of this it seems to benefit accountability. In these meetings the network members can be said to practise an upward accountability towards the local authorities and it can also strengthen the communication between the local authorities and the youth in the long run. Eva Mysliwiec writes in her study on youth in Cambodia that “Volunteering provides hands on experience in governance, responsibility and accountability, as well as reciprocity. It therefore contributes to good governance, participation, and citizenship, as well as building social capital.” (2005: executive summary).

Furthermore, the youth networks involved in the women’s project seemed to have a continuing relation to the commune council members responsible for women’s affairs in their communes. During a campaign against domestic

violence and discrimination against women that was organised by one youth network, three commune council members responsible for women's affairs in different communes were present and the commune council member from the commune where the campaign took place bicycled with the youth as they marched with banners through the commune.

The youth's activities can in themselves also be said to promote accountability between local authorities and the communities. Describing their activities, two network members from Kompong Cham said that:

“We really want the people to join with us because before they join with us they did not know the process of the commune work such as the birth certificate registration, or wedding letter, that how much they need to pay for those kind of services and for the health care center service, they do not really know how to pay. And when they participate with us they know that for make a wedding letter they have to pay this amount and this amount of money for the birth certificate” (youth network member, Kompong Cham).

“When we have the workshop we have the authorities and we have questions and answers between the people who come from the commune leader, the local police officer or the health care center” (youth network member, Kompong Cham)

Sedara Kim writes that it is a technical word that mostly is used as jargon (2012:42). Compared to the other terms that I looked at, *kanakney pheap* was rarely heard in discussions. In meetings and workshops with the youth for example, I never heard the word being used. Even if the youth do not use the word accountability, they seem to have awareness about the importance of being clear in the intentions and also of conducting activities that benefits the community.

“However, we still have some barriers in doing this, because the people who did not know yet they will not help us for they think that we will take the money and do bad things which is not useful for the society. As a result we have to ask for Permission letter from the commune and if it's possible we also ask one of them to accompany with us. This is the real experience to get succeed in the project” (network leader, Kompong Cham).

In the general context of Cambodia, the active involvement and understanding described here is probably mostly true for these youths or perhaps to the young generations of Cambodians. In academic writing on accountability in Cambodia the concept of accountability is often seen as difficult to practise due peoples negative experiences of political power and also to the underlying practise of patron-client relations in the Cambodian society, and also within the government institutions, where it is termed neo-patrimonialism (Kim 2012:131). The youth organisation is in a special position to build relations between local authorities and communities, since youth are keen to participate with commune council. However, there were some signs that the youth themselves linked their activities to related terms such as transparency.

## 5.2 Local NGO's as mediators

When interviewing the vice president of the organisation he described one of the organisation's roles as being an "agent for explanation" and a link between the donors and the local communities (interview 10). The vice president described the situation as that after the years of civil war which lead to the loss of most of Cambodia's educated population and the deficits in education that is a problem still today; the communities live by their own principles shaped by the past. He perceived it as that there is a need to "wake them [people in the communities] up" and "put words on" what is happening in the communities. To say, "Now it is not the rainy season so why is it raining so much? It wasn't used to be like this before, this is climate change." (interview 10). Both the vice president and the chief of the organisation's women's unit expressed a wish to facilitate change in the communities they work with but also perceived that this will take time.

"Change takes time. If you compare with agriculture it is very difficult to change from farming rice by hand to using machines. It can take five years, ten years... a very long time. Consider then how long time it takes to change someone's mind..." (Chief of women's unit)

In the preliminary analysis of the material from this study, Yin Dara explained this further. Drawing on his own experiences from working with development in Cambodia as well as his colleagues' experiences, he said:

"Some times people don't understand even if they know the concept, but they don't understand it. At least people get to understand it step by step, that's why sometimes some project it takes fifteen years to do that, five years, five years, five years... [...] Starting from our generation we think that Cambodia should move another step of development even some people do not understand the concept of development but I encourage, you know, international and local NGO to try to implement their concept of change so that people can understand" (Yin Dara).

This quote illustrates very well the position of the development workers that I interviewed and followed in project activities and meetings. The vice president also explained that in order to create understanding for concepts such as gender they need to work through different channels in the communities and make trainings and campaigns (interview 10). Both representatives for the organisation's management perceived a need in the local communities for knowledge and perspectives from outside Cambodia. The management of the organisation had a positive view on receiving input from their international partners. The chief of women's unit explained that most of the people in the communities they work with never have the chance to go anywhere and that they know only the situation in their own communities. For them the experience of the NGO and international partners can provide a larger perspective on their issues such as gender (interview 11).

Speaking about the situation in general in Cambodia the chief of women's unit added that some projects still are donor driven to some extent and that new words clearly promote western culture. However, she made a clear

distinction between the definitions of words and the practise. She stressed clearly that the concepts need to fit to the local level and that the organisation needs to ask themselves if the concept fit with the needs of the community;

“If you have a box of curriculum you don’t just give it to the community, you have to select only a few parts of all the documents that you think are useful for the participants. It is the same with the concepts that are promoted by the donors – they might have a western definition, but if they aren’t useful in the practical reality of the community they will not be selected” (Chief women’s unit).

In the section above I have argued for the case that it is valid to see local NGOs as ‘brokers’ or ‘mediators’ of development (Harris 2008:295) and also that the organisation that is the focus of this study has this role as an “agent for explanation”. Choosing the concepts that the staff perceived to fit with the needs of the community and implementing them as part of their programme, the local organisation seemed to assume the role of interpreting and redefining the English concepts to make sense in the Cambodian context. Of course for the development practitioners this is probably more a question about how to implement the concepts in the communities and how to make them available for ordinary people (much more than it is a language question). Nevertheless this process influences the language.

Speaking English then both puts a lot of responsibility upon local development practitioners to represent firstly the local problem, needs and priorities to international funders and secondly the knowledge and experiences of the international community towards the local people. Furthermore, studies of the language of development has shown and also criticised the English language of development for being abstract and lifted out of its political and cultural context to the point that it can be difficult to know what the terms actually mean (Arce 2000:27). This gives as Arce writes, the local development actors a possibility to interpret and adopt the language to the specific context they are working in. In other words the abstraction of the international development terms creates a space for local development actors to interpret and adjust the meaning of the terms.

An interesting example is the concept of empowerment. As has been illustrated there is a wide range of ways of expressing empowerment in Khmer. During a conversation with the senior program officer of the Swedish funding partner, she explained that in fact the Khmer language and the English language are not different, but that the different Khmer words for empowerment depend on that people understand the concept differently. She found that translating empowerment using *omnach* (power) was wrong and that it could not capture the real meaning of the term. Instead she thought that empowerment should be translated into *pung rung samatapheap* (strengthen the capability) (personal communication Ith Pov). On the other hand the chief of the women’s unit of the local organisation, said that there is a clear sense of power struggle in the concept of empowerment since it is really influences the position of men and women in the family (interview 11). It is interesting to ask why the interpretation is so

different here. Attempts to explain this has been made research (O’Leary 2007, O’Leary & Nee 2001), but it is a too complex issue to bring in here. Here it is sufficient to contend that local development staff are given a lot of power to interpret the policies and experiences of international actors and that in some cases they interpret this very differently.

### 5.3 The importance of language

In this last section I will return to the main question; what are the implications of the choice to use English instead of Khmer as the main language of communication in development cooperation? In order to answer this question I will compare the English and Khmer language in terms of the trends that can be found in the material presented.

First of all it is clear that several Khmer words related to development come from English. Of course this finding is given by the approach of the study, which traces English development terms into the Khmer language, but by looking at how these terms are practised it seems that these words are widely adopted and used and have significant influence in the practical development work. This corresponds to the idea of the theoretical framework, which suggests that terms such as development and empowerment are coined in the west and then imported to diverse and unique development contexts (Rigg *et al* 1999). The chief of women’s unit remarked that new words clearly promotes western culture and that it is the responsibility of the organisation to see to that they fit with the need of the communities (interview 11). This finding can also be strengthened by general trends observed in the Khmer language and the observation by Nee and O’Leary that discussions between local development workers often are interspersed with English words (2001:26). This is not an isolated occurrence, however, but can be seen as part of larger exchange with funding criteria, technical assistance, development reports and capacity building that are parts of the international development cooperation in Cambodia.

What the importance of language is, in relation to other power structures within international development cooperation, is a difficult to answer. Even if English words are translated into Khmer, the Khmer equivalents do not necessarily mean the same as the English words. As the gender advisor for Forum Syd said, “Words may be adopted from foreign languages but their meaning might change in the Cambodian usage” (interview 2). Since the English terms are abstract and mainstreamed out of their original context this creates space for re-contextualisation. The difference between the English and Khmer terms seems to be not so much in the definitions of the English and Khmer terms, but instead in the difference between how the Khmer terms are defined in theory and how they are practised. In theory the Khmer terms for participation, gender and accountability are difficult to separate from the English terms and they seem to mean more or less the same. Nevertheless, in order to be implemented these concepts need to be interpreted in relation to the situation of the communities and they need to

be explained in terms that make sense in the everyday life of ordinary Cambodians. In this process they take on different nuances. Discussing the four terms, practitioners often said that they explained the words through giving examples. Gender could for example be explained as “decision making and husband and wife helping each other in the home and taking care of the children together” (interview 11). I found that through giving examples the terms which are originally foreign become situated in the local context.

Furthermore, the youth organisation is an interesting case study, because the difference between the meaning of the words in theory and in practise seems to be much smaller in the case studied, than in discussions and literature about the general situation in Cambodia. Studies about the different development concepts which focus on the older generations show different results than this case study. An example is Kim’s study of the decentralisation process in Cambodia. In his study Kim looked into how commune council members and ordinary citizens talk about accountability and understand the term. He asked 583 Cambodian voters if they had ever heard the term *kanakney pheap* (accountability) and only 5 percent answered that they had heard it and nobody knew the meaning of the term (Kim 2012:131). The older generations of Cambodians was also found to be hesitant to be too closely connected to the local authorities, since many people have overwhelmingly negative experiences of power and authorities. In comparison the network members interviewed seemed to have a rather clear sense of what accountability is, even if they did not use the exact word. In an interview with the vice president of the youth organisation he said that the youth understand and adopt new concepts more easily than other generations. He described it as that in the globalisation process the youth have a need to follow new trends and to “stand up and make things in a different way from before” (interview 10). As an example a commune council member said that whereas the old generation have a limited understanding of gender, it is the opposite for the youth who are beginning to have a good understanding (interview 6).

Of the four terms empowerment is an exception. Empowerment is translated into Khmer in several different ways depending on who is using the term and in which situation. The Khmer terms for empowerment make visible the power structures that are at play in the local life in a completely different way than the English term empowerment. Some of the ways of saying empowerment such as ‘to dare to speak’ or ‘building trust and good relations’ clearly indicates what empowerment means and involves in the specific context. In this sense the Khmer term touches on the local context and promotes an understanding much more than the English term.

If it has been difficult to understand the effects of language choice on how people talk about development, the study highlights another issue very clearly. Using English drastically limits the possibility of communicating with most of the Cambodian population. Furthermore, speaking English gives substantial power to the Cambodians who can speak English, to represent and translate the ideas and experiences of both the local people and the international actors. In the interviews with local development

practitioners it became clear that the development concepts that they work with are new to the Cambodian context and that they as development practitioners actively have to choose which ideas and concepts that they will bring to the local communities. Speaking English instead of Khmer within international development cooperation therefore puts a lot of responsibility on and gives substantial power to local development practitioners in their role as mediators. This is not to say that the development practitioners do not have a valid position to represent Cambodian situation, or that they do not have the best of the people they work with in mind.

## Section Six - Conclusion

The study has found that several Khmer development terms comes from English and that they change meaning to varying degrees when they are contextualised in Cambodia. The resulting difference in the meaning of the terms is found between the definition of the Khmer word and the meaning it receives in practise more than between the definitions of the English and Khmer words. Here empowerment is the exception. These findings suggest that the Khmer language is still growing and that there are gaps between the meaning of the words and the meaning the words receive in practise. Related to the implications of speaking in English in development cooperation, this study found that speaking English gives the role of representing the local context to a very small part of the Cambodian population. The local development workers gain both power and responsibility to represent the local development issues, problems and priorities to the international community.

Even if the study did not show on a larger level how development is represented in Khmer and what the differences are between English and Khmer, the discussion on empowerment points to that language does have different potential to represent and reflect local contexts. Further research focusing on the Khmer language in order to look at conceptualisations related to development in Khmer language would be very valuable in order to understand more about the role of language in development. An interesting question for further research is how conceptualisations, values and beliefs that play a role in the development processes in Cambodia are expressed in the Khmer language itself. Cambodian knowledge is often shared in society through proverbs and stories and it can be highly valuable to understand how development processes are portrayed in local tales. In this study I came across one word, *santepeaweakam*, which was described as something like ‘peaceful action towards any beings’ (including trees and environment) but which the interviewee could not translate in what he felt was a satisfying way into English (interview 3). According to him there are many concepts that in Khmer that are difficult to translate into English, but it was outside the scope of this study.

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