



First Prize Essay

How Can Young People Help the Government be More Effective and Accountable?

*The World Bank's Program to Enhance Capacity for Social Accountability (PECSA) has announced the winners of a short essay competition on the topic: **What Can Young People Do to Help Government be more Effective and Accountable?** There were 168 essays submitted. Four won prizes and 22 were selected for certificate recognition. To share the flavor of what the essays were about, the World Bank newsletter publishes in its entirety the essay that won First Prize. It was written by Mr. CHAN Rotha, Mr. OU Sivhuoch, Mr. SEN Vicheth, Mr. SOK Say, and Mr. SOM Ratana.*



Mr Chan Rotha reads the winning essay at the PECSA launch on December 3, 2007.

What can young people, hereinafter defined as people under thirty-five, do to help make the Cambodian government more effective and accountable to their own people? Indeed, there is a very close link between citizenship and effective and accountable government, herein refers to a government with good governance. According to the Asian Development Bank, good governance enshrines four main pillars – accountability, participation, predictability and transparency (ADB, 1995, pp. 7-11). Good governance requires citizens' active participation, which conduces to public involvement in formulating and implementing government's policies. However, building a society with good governance is not an overnight work. It may take years or even decades and requires contribution from every stakeholder. Young people are among the most effective pressure groups and agents of change. They have full rights and responsibilities to demand accountability from their elected representatives and to check that they do their work effectively. There are many channels that young people can help make the government more effective and accountable.

Firstly, going to the poll is one way to exercise the rights and to fulfill one's duty as a citizen. Young people must be actively involved in making decisions as to which leaders they choose to lead the country. Although conventional, this is a fundamental form of how people can participate in decision-making. This is for certain an important way through which young people can make the government more effective and accountable because people aged under 30 and 18 make up 70 percent and 52 percent of Cambodia's 13.4 million citizens respectively (Phnom Penh Post, Oct 20 - Nov 2, 2006). Therefore, they constitute a major voice in electing the leaders, which is then a crucial push factor for good governance. Over the year there has been a worrying trend of voting apathy. Although there is no classified data indicating whether young people are in this category, hopefully they are not. In contrast, young people are in the best position to turn the tide.

Young people can also help make the government more effective and accountable by expressing their political voices. In addition to following news and information through mass media to keep themselves abreast of the current events in the country, the young can also make their voices heard by writing opinion letters to such print media as newspapers or magazines, joining the broadcast media, inclusive of call-in shows on the radio or television, and employing the new media, the Internet in particular, to express their opinions on certain issues, for instance. According to a survey conducted by Chan and Sok (2007) on 222 students randomly selected from the Institute of Foreign Languages of the Royal University of Phnom Penh, 98% of whom were people under 30, shows that they all acknowledge the importance of reading, yet only 15.6% of 205 respondents read in their free time¹. Young people must learn to receive information, news and knowledge through reading, and watching and listening to the programs that raise young people's awareness of social, economic, legal and political issues and development, such as Equity News, What Is Law?, Roundtable Discussions, Voice of Justice, Hello VOA, Radio Free Asia's Call-in Show, National Assembly Debate, Public Speeches by prominent figures, just to

mention a few. They then need to make their voices heard. At the same time, the media outlets must be favorable for them to express their ideas or grievances in a free and fair atmosphere because at the present time the channels for them to express their ideas and grievances are still insufficient. Further, they can express their opinions by taking part in any advocacy group, public meeting or forum. By doing all of these things, not only can young people have the opportunity to share their opinions with the other stakeholders, they can also make themselves engaged in checking the government's performance and making sure that they do their jobs. This also contributes to building an effective and accountable government.

Moreover, active engagement in community services and volunteering to help solve community problems with others is another form of civic activity which young people can do to check the effectiveness and accountability of the government. The benefit from this engagement is two-fold. One is that apart from gaining useful experiences and building networks with other people in the community, the volunteer can make themselves useful for the society and keep themselves well-informed of the current situations in the country. Participating in these activities helps raise youth's awareness about the current social, economic, legal and political issues and development in the country, which will place them at a better position to check the government's performance. The other is that they can train or be a model for the general public to monitor what the government does. In this sense, they help create more watchdogs to check the government's policies and actions.

A study by Anirudh Krishna (2002) on a few communities in rural India is a telling example to show that young people is the catalysts for good governance. He proves that when young graduates facilitate the communication between the local authority and the local people, the local government is more accountable and effective. At the local level, there are other venues for young people to contribute to establishing an effective and accountable govern-

¹ It is also interesting to note that watching TV, or movies in this sense, accounts for 37.7%, and that the rest of the respondents spend the time mainly to sleep, to do physical exercises, to hang out, to do homework and to surf the Internet.

ment, one of which is through active participation in commune meetings of their local leaders. In the current structure of local governance in Cambodia, besides periodic commune elections, the mechanisms for local citizens to demand accountability from local leaders include the participatory planning process and commune meetings. Young people through such processes can air their voices, advocate for certain actions or initiate rules and amendments to established rules. At the national level, young people can also meet the representatives or other government officials to express their views or assist others in making their voices heard. It is actually the duty of the constituents and the representatives to discuss issues of concern on a regular or ad-hoc basis.

More importantly, young people need to play a proactive role in breaking the old system of strong patron-client relations and high power distance in Cambodian society. Socially and politically, Cambodia is replete with very strong patronage networks through which both patrons and clients strive to seek “crucial means of gaining access to resources and increasing one’s status,” thus making this relationship characterized by “distrusts and suspicions” (Hinton, 2004, pp. 122 – 125). In Cambodia, social integrity exists when people conform to and recognize “the status hierarchy” (Blunt, 2003, p. 13). In cultures with an unequal distribution of power, those in inferior positions find it difficult to challenge their superiors because subordinates tend to find it socially unacceptable to show any contempt for the actions and decisions of their leaders. Consequently, in Cambodia, local participation, responsiveness and questioning of the local authorities have yet to be transformed into reality (Martin, 1994, p. 11).

Young people as one of the agents of change need to break down these indigenous social relations so that rights for themselves and the rest of the citizens can be obtained. Without claims for rights, one will not enjoy full rights. Through media or petitions, they can advocate for civic education to be incorporated into school curricula. Civic education teaches people about active participation in their community and tells people that morals and values of a nation do not go against democratic values such as “autonomy and plurality” (Barber, 1984, pp. 233 – 244), and so by extension to attain good governance. Young people should lobby

for more focus on the following topics – nationalism, social trust, civic engagement, solidarity and volunteerism – in the educational program. At school, young people need to participate in mock elections, students’ committees, community relief groups, and debate clubs, just to name a few, which are an effective method to learn civic education and to evaluate democratic environment. Furthermore, those who are knowledgeable about civic education can further spread this knowledge to their peers and the older through awareness raising campaigns. Currently, such campaigns and activities are carried out by some students’ groups affiliated to a number of non-governmental organizations including NGO Committee on the Rights of the Child, a network of more than 40 child-focused NGOs, Youth Star Cambodia, Khmer Youth Association, Khmer Students Association, Youth Council of Cambodia, the Student’s Movement for Democracy, and Cambodian Red Cross and Crescent.

Last but by no means least, the creation of *Student Parliament*, which is currently not in existence in Cambodia, in especially every high school should draw more attention from the concerned stakeholders as it is an effective method which young people can engage in the betterment of governance. Through this parliament, students may express what they like, do not like and dislike about school management, curricula and environment and how they propose and press for a change. This student body also serves as a channel through which information can be shared among students and across schools. Through participation in such a body, young people can keep themselves updated, learn to take leadership roles, learn how decisions are made, and learn to be accountable.

To conclude, the afore-mentioned are the chief, practical and feasible means for young people to help make the government more effective and accountable. Regular voting in both commune and national elections, participation in expressing their political voices, active involvement in community services and volunteering, contribution to the breaking down of the patron-client relations, and active engagement in *Student Parliament* are all essential prerequisites to help obtain an effective and accountable government. Young people should act, be a role model for others and then inspire others into action. They should also make use of all the existing channels to propose and

press for better governance before thinking of and adopting other possible means. Taking these actions means four things for young people. First is to claim their rights as citizens; second is to exercise their rights as citizens; third is to fulfill their obligations as citizens; and fourth is to make the general public be well aware of and to encourage them to fully use their rights as citizens, which contributes to shaping an effective and accountable government.

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The World Bank Small Grants Program

Call for Proposals

Closing date: January 18, 2008

The World Bank Small Grants Program FY 2008 is intended to support activities, which the primary objective is civic engagement for better governance in Cambodia.

Proposals must reflect the theme of “**Working Together For Good Governance**”.

Activities may include, but not limited to, the following:

- Workshops, meetings, seminars to enhance knowledge, capacity and skills to citizen in promoting, mediating and addressing demands in key reforms areas;
- Innovative activities, networking efforts to increase citizen participation, to empower women commune councilors in decision making on local development issues;
- Programs promoting access to information, citizen monitoring and feedback on governance.

Who can apply?

- Cambodian Non Governmental Organizations;
- Grant awarding is ranging from US\$5,000 to \$7,000 for each application; activities should be completed within one year from the date the grant awarded (around May, 2008).
- Fund supporting only civic engagement activities, not covering operation or administrative cost.

How to apply – Deadline

Application form is available at reception desk, World Bank Country Office Phnom Penh, address: #113 Norodom Blvd., or email to nou@worldbank.org.

Proposals should submit not later than **January 18, 2008** to World Bank Country Office Phnom Penh; Attention to The Small Grants Program.

For more information please contact:
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