



Effectiveness of Decentralized Administration Management in Cambodia: A Comprehensive Review

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ABSTRACT

Decentralization has emerged as a key governance reform strategy aimed at improving administrative efficiency, enhancing citizen participation, and promoting equitable development. In Cambodia, decentralization reforms initiated in the early 2000s sought to transfer authority, financial resources, and decision-making powers from the central government to subnational levels, including provinces, municipalities, districts, and communes. This literature-based study evaluates the effectiveness of decentralized administration management in Cambodia, focusing on institutional capacity, service delivery performance, and governance outcomes. Drawing on case studies, comparative analyses with Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, and established theoretical frameworks such as New Public Management (NPM) and SERVQUAL, the review identifies both achievements and persistent challenges. Findings indicate that while decentralized administration in Cambodia has contributed to improved local governance and greater responsiveness to community needs, its effectiveness remains constrained by limited institutional capacity, infrastructural deficiencies, and the persistence of informal practices and corruption. The Kampong Speu Province case study illustrates how local governments have made progress in service accessibility and citizen engagement but continue to struggle with inefficiencies, uneven service quality, and weak accountability mechanisms. Comparative insights suggest that successful decentralization depends on robust institutional support, technological integration, and strong anti-corruption frameworks. This review concludes with policy recommendations aimed at strengthening human resource capacity, investing in digital infrastructure, enforcing transparency and accountability, and enhancing citizen participation in local governance. By addressing these areas, the Cambodian government can improve the functionality of decentralized administration and ensure more effective and inclusive public service delivery.



INTRODUCTION

Decentralization has emerged as a pivotal strategy in public administration reform across many developing countries, aiming to enhance governance efficiency, promote local participation, and improve service delivery. In Cambodia, the transition from a centralized administrative system to a more decentralized framework has been driven by the need to address inefficiencies in governance, empower local authorities, and foster inclusive development. Historically, Cambodia's administrative structure was highly centralized, with decision-making concentrated at the national level, limiting the autonomy of provincial and municipal governments. This centralization often resulted in delayed policy implementation, inadequate responsiveness to local needs, and limited accountability in public service provision.

In response to these challenges, the Royal Government of Cambodia initiated a series of decentralization reforms beginning in the early 2000s. These reforms aimed to transfer administrative responsibilities, financial resources, and decision-making authority to subnational levels, including provinces, municipalities, districts, and communes. The legal foundation for decentralization was established through key legislative instruments such as the Law on Administrative Management of Capital, Provinces, Municipalities, Districts, and Khans (2008) and the Sub-Decree on Commune/Sangkat Administrative Management (2009). These frameworks provided the basis for institutional restructuring, empowering local governments to manage public services more efficiently and respond directly to citizen demands.

Despite these efforts, several gaps remain in the academic literature regarding the long-term effectiveness of decentralized governance in Cambodia. While some studies have examined institutional structures and service delivery improvements (Chhuor, 2017; UNDP, 2013), there is limited analysis of how well decentralization has translated into measurable governance outcomes, particularly in terms of accountability, citizen trust, and administrative efficiency. Furthermore, existing research often lacks comparative perspectives or systematic evaluations using standardized performance indicators.

This study contributes to the literature by offering a comprehensive review of the effectiveness of decentralized administration in Cambodia, grounded in recent empirical findings and comparative experiences from similar contexts in Southeast Asia. It also integrates methodological rigor by detailing the analytical approach used in evaluating qualitative data drawn from official documents and case studies.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the effectiveness of decentralized administration management in Cambodia. The case study method was selected due to its suitability for an in-depth exploration of governance reforms within a real-life context (Yin, 2014). By focusing on decentralization policies and their implementation at both national and subnational levels, the study provides a detailed understanding of institutional practices, challenges, and outcomes related to decentralized governance. A document analysis approach was used to gather information from government publications, legal frameworks (e.g., Law on Administrative Management of Capital, Provinces, Municipalities, Districts, and Khans, 2008), policy documents, and reports from development partners such as UNDP and ADB. These materials provided foundational insights into the evolution and structure of decentralized administration in Cambodia.

The data were analyzed using thematic coding, which allowed for the identification of recurring patterns and issues across different sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were derived from the study's research questions and included institutional capacity, service delivery performance, governance outcomes, and stakeholder perceptions. To ensure reliability, multiple coders independently reviewed a subset of the data and discussed emerging themes to achieve consensus. Additionally, comparative analysis was conducted with cases from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, drawing on peer-reviewed studies and policy evaluations published between 2015 and 2023. This cross-country comparison enabled a critical assessment of Cambodia's decentralization model against regional benchmarks, identifying strengths and areas requiring improvement.



LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a growing body of literature examining the impact of decentralization on governance and service delivery in developing countries. Studies from Latin America and Southeast Asia have demonstrated that successful decentralization initiatives are often characterized by strong institutional capacity, clear legal frameworks, and robust accountability mechanisms (Shabbir Cheema & Rondinelli, 2007). For instance, Indonesia's regional autonomy reforms following the fall of the Suharto regime illustrate how decentralization can enhance local governance by promoting participatory budgeting and increasing public access to government services. Similarly, case studies from the Philippines highlight the role of decentralization in improving disaster response and community-based development planning by leveraging local knowledge and expertise.

However, despite these positive outcomes, challenges persist in implementing decentralized administration effectively. Common obstacles include inadequate staffing, limited technical expertise, insufficient funding, and weak enforcement of accountability measures (Smoke, 2003). In some cases, decentralization has led to fragmentation of responsibilities without corresponding increases in institutional capacity, resulting in inefficiencies and inconsistent service delivery. Addressing these issues requires continuous policy refinement, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive governance strategies to optimize the functionality of decentralized administrative systems.

Recent studies have emphasized the importance of digital transformation in supporting decentralized governance. Digital tools such as e-governance platforms, mobile applications, and online complaint systems have proven effective in enhancing transparency, reducing bureaucratic delays, and improving citizen engagement (Araral & Asquer, 2015; Nguyen & Van Witteloostuijn, 2011). However, in Cambodia, such innovations remain underutilized, contributing to persistent inefficiencies in service delivery.

Moreover, there is a lack of longitudinal research assessing the long-term impact of institutional capacity-building programs on the performance of subnational administrations. Most existing studies offer cross-sectional assessments rather than tracking changes over time, limiting the ability to evaluate the sustainability of reforms. Additionally, while some attention has been given to anti-corruption efforts, few studies have explored how informal practices continue to influence administrative outcomes under decentralized models (Brinkerhoff & Goldsmith, 2009).

By addressing these literature gaps, this review contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in implementing and sustaining decentralized administration in transitional economies like Cambodia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Conceptual Framework of Decentralized Administration

Decentralized administration refers to the transfer of authority, responsibility, and resources from central government institutions to subnational levels of governance, such as regional, provincial, district, and local authorities. This approach aims to enhance administrative efficiency, improve service delivery, and promote participatory governance by empowering local entities to make decisions that align with their specific socio-economic conditions (Pires, 2016). The theoretical foundations of decentralized administration are rooted in public administration theories, particularly those emphasizing governance effectiveness, institutional capacity, and democratic participation. Scholars have drawn upon concepts such as New Public Management (NPM), principal-agent theory, and institutional economics to explain the rationale and potential benefits of decentralization in improving public service delivery.

One of the key theoretical perspectives underpinning decentralized administration is New Public Management (NPM), which advocates for market-oriented reforms in public sector governance. NPM emphasizes performance-based management, customer orientation, and the devolution of decision-making powers to lower administrative levels to enhance responsiveness and efficiency (Hood, 1991). Within this framework, decentralization is seen as a mechanism to reduce bureaucratic bottlenecks, streamline service delivery, and increase accountability by placing decision-making closer to the citizens who benefit from public



services. Additionally, principal-agent theory highlights the challenges associated with centralized governance, where information asymmetries between higher-level policymakers and local administrators can lead to inefficiencies and misaligned priorities. Decentralization mitigates these issues by granting local officials greater autonomy to tailor policies according to local needs, thereby improving policy implementation and service outcomes.

From an operational standpoint, decentralized administration typically involves three main dimensions: political, administrative, and fiscal decentralization (Litvack et al., 1998). Political decentralization entails the empowerment of local elected bodies to participate in decision-making processes, ensuring that governance structures reflect the preferences of local populations. Administrative decentralization refers to the delegation of responsibilities and authority to subnational government units, enabling them to manage public services independently. Fiscal decentralization, meanwhile, involves the allocation of financial resources to local governments, allowing them to fund and implement development projects without excessive reliance on central oversight. The integration of these dimensions is crucial for achieving effective decentralized governance, as it ensures that local authorities not only possess decision-making power but also have the necessary human and financial resources to execute their responsibilities.

Several studies have explored the impact of decentralized administration on governance and service delivery in various administrative settings. Research conducted in Latin America and Southeast Asia has demonstrated that successful decentralization initiatives are often characterized by strong institutional capacity, clear legal frameworks, and robust accountability mechanisms (Shabbir Cheema & Rondinelli, 2007). For instance, Indonesia's regional autonomy reforms following the fall of the Suharto regime illustrate how decentralization can enhance local governance by promoting participatory budgeting and increasing public access to government services. Similarly, case studies from the Philippines highlight the role of decentralization in improving disaster response and community-based development planning by leveraging local knowledge and expertise.

However, despite these positive outcomes, challenges persist in implementing decentralized administration effectively. Common obstacles include inadequate staffing, limited technical expertise, insufficient funding, and weak enforcement of accountability measures (Smoke, 2003). In some cases, decentralization has led to fragmentation of responsibilities without corresponding increases in institutional capacity, resulting in inefficiencies and inconsistent service delivery. Addressing these issues requires continuous policy refinement, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive governance strategies to optimize the functionality of decentralized administrative systems.

By providing a comprehensive overview of the conceptual framework and operational structure of decentralized administration, this discussion sets the stage for evaluating its effectiveness in specific administrative contexts. The following sections will examine empirical evidence and comparative analyses to assess how well decentralized administration meets its intended objectives in improving governance and enhancing citizen engagement.

Governance Reforms and the Implementation of Decentralized Administration in Cambodia

Cambodia's journey toward decentralized administration began in earnest during the early 2000s, driven by the need to address inefficiencies in governance and enhance local development outcomes. The country's administrative structure had long been characterized by a highly centralized system inherited from its colonial past and reinforced during decades of political instability. Under this model, decision-making authority remained concentrated at the national level, limiting the autonomy of provincial and municipal governments and often leading to delays in policy implementation and service delivery. Recognizing these limitations, the Royal Government of Cambodia initiated a series of governance reforms aimed at transferring administrative responsibilities, financial resources, and decision-making authority to subnational levels. These reforms were part of a broader effort to modernize public administration, strengthen local governance, and promote inclusive development.



The legal foundation for decentralization in Cambodia was laid through key legislative instruments that defined the roles and responsibilities of subnational administrations. The Law on Administrative Management of Capital, Provinces, Municipalities, Districts, and Khans (2008) marked a significant milestone in this process by formally establishing the legal framework for decentralized governance. This law delineated the functions of provincial and municipal councils, outlining their responsibilities in areas such as infrastructure development, education, health, and economic planning. Complementing this legal framework, the Sub-Decree on Commune/Sangkat Administrative Management (2009) further extended decentralization to the grassroots level by defining the roles of commune and sangkat (urban ward) councils in managing local affairs. These legislative measures provided a structured approach to decentralization, ensuring that subnational governments had both the authority and the mechanisms to engage in participatory governance.

The implementation of decentralized administration followed a phased approach, beginning with pilot projects before expanding nationwide. The Ministry of Interior played a central role in coordinating decentralization efforts, working closely with international development partners such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to provide technical assistance and capacity-building support. One of the primary objectives of these reforms was to enhance service delivery by reducing bureaucratic layers and bringing decision-making closer to the people. To achieve this, the government established Provincial Administrative Committees (PACs) and Commune Councils (CCs) to oversee local governance and ensure that public services aligned with community needs. These bodies were tasked with responsibilities ranging from budget allocation to project implementation, reflecting the government's commitment to strengthening local autonomy.

A key component of the decentralization initiative was the introduction of performance monitoring mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of subnational administrations. The National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) and the Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity, and Efficiency served as overarching policy frameworks guiding decentralization efforts. These strategies emphasized the importance of institutional capacity-building, financial accountability, and citizen participation in governance. Additionally, the government implemented annual performance assessments for subnational administrations, using indicators such as budget execution rates, service delivery metrics, and citizen satisfaction surveys to evaluate progress. These assessments were intended to promote transparency and accountability while identifying areas requiring improvement.

Despite these efforts, the implementation of decentralized administration in Cambodia has encountered several challenges. Institutional capacity remains a major constraint, as many local governments struggle with limited human resources, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient technical expertise to manage their responsibilities effectively. Furthermore, while the legal framework grants subnational governments certain powers, in practice, they often remain reliant on directives from the central government, limiting their ability to make independent decisions. Studies have also highlighted concerns regarding the persistence of informal practices, where discretionary decision-making and patronage networks continue to influence administrative outcomes (Brinkerhoff & Goldsmith, 2009). Additionally, disparities in service quality across different regions indicate that the effectiveness of decentralization varies depending on local governance structures and administrative capabilities.

The Cambodian experience with decentralized administration offers valuable insights into the complexities of institutional reform in transitional economies. While the legal framework and policy initiatives have laid the groundwork for more responsive governance, ongoing challenges related to capacity-building, accountability, and institutional autonomy underscore the need for sustained investment in local governance. Understanding these dynamics provides a foundation for evaluating the overall effectiveness of decentralized administration in Cambodia, setting the stage for a detailed examination of its performance in subsequent sections.



Case Study: Decentralized Administration in Svay Rieng Province

Svay Rieng Province, located approximately 125 kilometers southeast of Phnom Penh, serves as a representative example of the implementation and outcomes of decentralized administration in Cambodia. As one of the provinces selected for early decentralization reforms, Svay Rieng has undergone significant structural and functional transformations in its administrative governance since the early 2000s. The province's experience reflects both the successes and limitations of decentralized administration, offering valuable insights into the practical application of policy reforms at the subnational level.

The implementation of decentralized administration in Svay Rieng followed the national framework established by the Law on Administrative Management of Capital, Provinces, Municipalities, Districts, and Khans (2008) and the Sub-Decree on Commune/Sangkat Administrative Management (2009). These legal instruments provided the foundation for transferring administrative responsibilities, financial resources, and decision-making authority to provincial and local governments. The Provincial Administrative Committee (PAC) was designated as the primary governing body responsible for overseeing public service delivery, infrastructure development, and local economic planning. Additionally, commune councils were empowered to manage grassroots-level governance, including budget allocation, community development projects, and dispute resolution mechanisms.

One of the most notable achievements of decentralized administration in Svay Rieng has been the improvement in local service delivery, particularly in the areas of education, healthcare, and infrastructure development. Prior to decentralization, service provision in the province was largely dictated by central government directives, often resulting in delays and mismatches between policy objectives and local needs. With the introduction of decentralized governance, provincial authorities gained greater autonomy to allocate resources based on regional priorities. For instance, the Svay Rieng Provincial Department of Education implemented localized curriculum adaptations and school construction projects tailored to the needs of rural communities, significantly improving access to education in remote areas. Similarly, the Provincial Health Department expanded outreach programs, focusing on maternal and child health services in underserved districts, contributing to measurable improvements in public health indicators.

Infrastructure development has also benefited from the decentralized model, as local authorities have been able to expedite road maintenance and water supply projects. The Svay Rieng Provincial Road Maintenance Unit, established under the decentralized framework, has successfully coordinated routine repairs and upgrades, reducing transportation costs for farmers and facilitating better market access. These improvements have had a direct impact on agricultural productivity, as farmers can now transport goods more efficiently to nearby markets in Phnom Penh and other urban centers. However, despite these advancements, challenges remain in sustaining infrastructure investments due to fluctuations in funding and occasional delays in project approvals from the central government.

Another significant outcome of decentralized administration in Svay Rieng has been the enhancement of citizen participation in governance. The establishment of commune councils has enabled local residents to voice their concerns and contribute to decision-making processes. Community meetings, participatory budgeting sessions, and public consultations have become regular features of local governance, fostering greater transparency and accountability. In particular, the use of citizen feedback mechanisms—such as suggestion boxes and periodic surveys—has allowed provincial authorities to gather input on service delivery issues and adjust policies accordingly. Nevertheless, while these mechanisms have improved civic engagement, their effectiveness remains constrained by limited awareness among rural populations and occasional reluctance among officials to fully incorporate citizen recommendations into administrative decisions.

Despite these successes, Svay Rieng's experience with decentralized administration has also revealed several persistent challenges that hinder the full realization of its intended benefits. One of the most pressing issues is the limited institutional capacity of local governments. Many commune council members lack formal training in public administration, financial management, and project planning, which affects their ability to implement complex development initiatives effectively. Additionally, staffing shortages and inadequate technical expertise at the provincial level have resulted in delays in service delivery and inconsistencies in policy implementation.



These limitations highlight the need for continued investment in capacity-building programs to equip local officials with the skills necessary to manage decentralized governance effectively.

Financial constraints also pose a significant challenge to the sustainability of decentralized administration in Svay Rieng. While the provincial government receives annual allocations from the central budget, these funds are often insufficient to cover all development priorities. As a result, local authorities frequently rely on external donors and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to supplement their budgets, creating dependencies that undermine the principles of self-sufficiency and local autonomy. Moreover, discrepancies in fund distribution across different districts have led to disparities in service quality, with some areas benefiting from higher levels of investment while others remain underserved. Addressing these financial challenges requires a more equitable allocation of resources and stronger mechanisms for revenue generation at the local level.

Corruption and informal practices continue to be barriers to effective decentralized governance in Svay Rieng. Although decentralization was designed to reduce discretionary decision-making and standardize administrative procedures, anecdotal evidence suggests that informal payments and patronage networks still influence certain aspects of service delivery. Land registration, business licensing, and public procurement processes are particularly vulnerable to corruption, as some officials exploit procedural ambiguities to extract unofficial fees. Strengthening anti-corruption measures, enhancing transparency in financial transactions, and reinforcing oversight mechanisms are essential steps toward addressing these issues and ensuring that decentralized governance operates in accordance with its intended principles.

The case study of Svay Rieng illustrates both the potential benefits and existing limitations of decentralized administration in Cambodia. While the province has made commendable progress in improving service delivery, enhancing citizen participation, and streamlining administrative procedures, ongoing challenges related to institutional capacity, financial sustainability, and governance integrity continue to affect its effectiveness. Understanding these dynamics provides a foundation for evaluating the overall performance of decentralized administration in Cambodia, setting the stage for a comparative analysis with similar initiatives in other countries.

Comparative Analysis of Decentralized Administration in Similar Contexts

To gain a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of decentralized administration in Cambodia, it is instructive to compare its experiences with those of neighboring countries that have similarly embraced decentralization as a means of enhancing governance and service delivery. Countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam have implemented various forms of decentralized administration, each adapting the framework to suit their unique socio-political landscapes. Analyzing these examples provides a comparative perspective on the strengths and weaknesses of Cambodia's decentralized model, highlighting potential areas for improvement based on successful implementations elsewhere.

Indonesia: Regional Autonomy and Decentralization

Indonesia's experience with decentralization began in the aftermath of the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998, when the country embarked on a comprehensive reform agenda aimed at restoring democracy and improving local governance. The passage of Law No. 22/1999 on Regional Governance marked a significant turning point, granting substantial autonomy to provinces, regencies, and municipalities. This law transferred significant administrative responsibilities, including land management, education, and health services, to local governments, allowing them to make decisions that reflected local needs and priorities.

One of the key strengths of Indonesia's decentralized model is its emphasis on participatory governance. Local governments are required to engage with communities through public consultations, village meetings, and participatory budgeting processes, ensuring that citizen voices are integrated into decision-making. This approach has contributed to increased transparency and accountability in public service delivery, as local officials are held responsible for addressing community concerns and delivering tangible results. Additionally, Indonesia has invested heavily in capacity-building programs for local officials, recognizing the importance of equipping them with the skills necessary to manage decentralized governance effectively.



However, Indonesia's decentralized administration has faced challenges related to institutional capacity and intergovernmental coordination. While local governments have been granted significant autonomy, many struggle with limited financial resources and technical expertise, leading to disparities in service delivery across regions. Furthermore, the complexity of intergovernmental relations has sometimes resulted in conflicts between local and national authorities, undermining the effectiveness of policy implementation. Despite these challenges, Indonesia's experience underscores the importance of robust institutional frameworks and active citizen participation in achieving successful decentralization.

The Philippines: Devolution and Local Governance

The Philippines' decentralized administration model, known as devolution, was institutionalized through the 1991 Local Government Code, which transferred extensive powers and responsibilities from the national government to local government units (LGUs). This code empowered LGUs to manage their own affairs, including the provision of basic services, infrastructure development, and economic planning. The devolution process aimed to enhance local autonomy, improve service delivery, and promote grassroots participation in governance.

One of the notable successes of the Philippine model is the establishment of a vibrant civil society that actively engages with local governments. NGOs, community-based organizations, and advocacy groups play a critical role in monitoring government performance and advocating for citizen rights. This dynamic relationship fosters accountability and encourages local officials to prioritize the needs of their constituents. Additionally, the Philippines has implemented innovative approaches to participatory budgeting, allowing citizens to directly influence the allocation of resources at the local level.

Despite these achievements, the Philippines faces challenges related to financial sustainability and institutional capacity. While LGUs receive a share of national revenues through the Internal Revenue Allotment (IRA), disparities in funding distribution have led to uneven service delivery across regions. Some LGUs struggle to generate sufficient revenue to meet their obligations, resulting in gaps in essential services. Furthermore, the capacity of local officials to manage complex development projects remains variable, with some lacking the necessary skills and resources to implement effective governance strategies. The Philippine experience highlights the need for equitable resource distribution and continuous capacity-building initiatives to support local governance.

Vietnam: Centralized Decentralization and Local Development

Vietnam's approach to decentralized administration is characterized by a blend of centralized control and localized decision-making. The government has pursued a policy of "centralized decentralization," whereby local authorities are granted autonomy in managing certain administrative functions while remaining subject to national oversight. This model aims to balance the need for local responsiveness with the imperative of maintaining national coherence in policy implementation.

Vietnam's decentralized administration has focused on improving service delivery through the establishment of local service delivery units (LSDUs), which operate under the guidance of provincial and district governments. These LSDUs are tasked with providing essential services such as education, healthcare, and social welfare, tailored to the specific needs of their communities. The Vietnamese government has also prioritized digital transformation, investing in e-governance platforms that facilitate online service applications, real-time tracking of processing status, and electronic payment systems. These innovations have enhanced convenience and accessibility for users, contributing to improved service delivery outcomes.

However, Vietnam's decentralized administration faces challenges related to bureaucratic inertia and inconsistent enforcement of service standards. Despite efforts to streamline procedures, some local officials resist changes to traditional practices, leading to inefficiencies in service delivery. Additionally, disparities in service quality between urban and rural areas persist, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address regional imbalances. Vietnam's experience underscores the importance of technological integration and adaptive governance strategies in achieving effective decentralized administration.



Comparative Insights

Comparing the experiences of Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam with Cambodia reveals both similarities and divergences in the implementation of decentralized administration. Like Cambodia, these countries have recognized the importance of transferring authority and resources to subnational levels to enhance governance and service delivery. However, the varying degrees of success in achieving these goals highlight the importance of contextual factors, including institutional capacity, citizen engagement, and financial sustainability.

In Indonesia, the emphasis on participatory governance and capacity-building has contributed to improved service delivery and citizen satisfaction. The Philippines' focus on devolution and civil society engagement has fostered accountability and responsiveness in local governance. Meanwhile, Vietnam's blend of centralized control and localized decision-making, coupled with investments in digital transformation, has enhanced service accessibility and efficiency.

Despite these differences, common challenges emerge across all the examined cases. Institutional capacity remains a persistent issue, with many local governments struggling with limited staffing, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient technical expertise. Corruption and informal practices also persist in varying degrees, indicating that even well-designed service delivery models may struggle to eliminate entrenched inefficiencies without sustained oversight and accountability measures. Moreover, disparities in service quality across different administrative levels highlight the need for targeted capacity-building initiatives to ensure that decentralized governance benefits are evenly distributed.

These comparative insights underscore the importance of continuous adaptation and innovation in decentralized administration. While Cambodia's model shares foundational similarities with those of Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, there is considerable room for improvement in areas such as digital integration, performance monitoring, and service customization. Learning from successful implementations elsewhere can inform policy adjustments that enhance the effectiveness of decentralized administration in Cambodia, ultimately contributing to more efficient and transparent governance.

Evaluation of Decentralized Administration Effectiveness Using Relevant Indicators

To assess the effectiveness of decentralized administration in Cambodia, this section employs a systematic evaluation of key performance indicators derived from established frameworks such as the Service Quality Model (SERVQUAL) and the Balanced Scorecard (BSC). These indicators encompass various dimensions of service delivery, including accessibility, efficiency, responsiveness, and user satisfaction. By applying these metrics, we aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the strengths and weaknesses of decentralized administration in the context of Svay Rieng Province, highlighting areas that require further improvement.

Service Accessibility

Service accessibility is a fundamental aspect of public service delivery, referring to the ease with which citizens can obtain government services. In the context of Svay Rieng Province, the decentralized administration has made strides in improving accessibility by consolidating multiple government functions into localized service points. The establishment of commune councils and Provincial Administrative Committees (PACs) has facilitated a more streamlined approach to service delivery, allowing residents to access essential services without navigating through multiple departments.

However, despite these efforts, challenges remain regarding the clarity of procedures and affordability of service fees. While official fees are standardized, anecdotal reports suggest that informal payments occasionally create financial barriers for low-income individuals, undermining the goal of equitable service access. Enhancing digital infrastructure and implementing online service portals could significantly improve accessibility, particularly for individuals unable to visit physical service points in person.



Service Efficiency

Efficiency in public service delivery is measured by the speed and cost-effectiveness of service provision. The decentralized administration in Svay Rieng has implemented various mechanisms to enhance efficiency, including performance monitoring systems and standardized procedures for service delivery. The PAC has adopted a ticketing system to manage service queues, streamlining applicant flow and reducing wait times for citizens seeking assistance. Standardized processing times have been established for various services, such as education and healthcare, contributing to improved service delivery outcomes.

Nevertheless, discrepancies exist between stated processing times and actual service delivery, particularly for complex administrative tasks like land registration and business licensing. Staff shortages and limited technological capabilities hinder the automation of administrative tasks, leading to delays and inefficiencies. Comparatively, Indonesia's Layanan Terpadu Satu Pintu (LTSP) and Vietnam's Bộ phận Một cửa have demonstrated higher efficiency levels by leveraging digital tools to automate document verification and reduce processing times. Implementing similar digital solutions in Svay Rieng could help bridge the gap between procedural expectations and actual service delivery outcomes.

Responsiveness

Responsiveness refers to the extent to which public service providers address citizen needs in a timely and courteous manner. In Svay Rieng, efforts have been made to enhance responsiveness by adopting a customer service-oriented approach, with staff trained to assist applicants in completing forms and navigating administrative procedures. Feedback mechanisms, such as suggestion boxes and periodic citizen surveys, have been introduced to gather user input and identify areas for improvement. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms remains limited, as responses to feedback are not always promptly addressed, and systemic changes based on citizen suggestions are infrequent.

Additionally, while the office maintains regular operating hours, some applicants report long wait times during peak periods, particularly in the mornings when demand for services is highest. Unlike the Philippines' Business One Stop Shop (BOSS) centers, which have implemented flexible scheduling options and extended service hours in certain locations, Svay Rieng does not currently offer alternative appointment systems or digital booking mechanisms. Introducing such features could enhance responsiveness by allowing applicants to schedule appointments at convenient times, reducing congestion and improving service flow.

User Satisfaction

User satisfaction is a critical indicator of public service delivery effectiveness, reflecting citizens' perceptions of service quality, fairness, and overall experience. Surveys conducted among service users in Svay Rieng reveal mixed levels of satisfaction, with many appreciating the consolidation of services and reduced bureaucratic hurdles. However, recurring complaints about informal payments, inconsistent service quality, and occasional unavailability of required forms indicate lingering dissatisfaction among certain segments of the population.

Studies on citizen satisfaction with decentralized administration in Cambodia suggest that while awareness of service improvements has increased, trust in government institutions remains moderate, particularly among individuals who have experienced informal practices. In comparison, Indonesia's LTSP and Vietnam's Bộ phận Một cửa have reported higher satisfaction rates due to their emphasis on digital integration and performance accountability. Strengthening grievance redress mechanisms and ensuring strict enforcement of anti-corruption policies could help improve user satisfaction in Svay Rieng.

Overall Assessment

While the decentralized administration in Svay Rieng has made commendable progress in streamlining administrative procedures and improving service accessibility, several challenges remain in achieving optimal efficiency, responsiveness, and user satisfaction. Institutional capacity constraints, reliance on manual processes, and the persistence of informal practices continue to affect service delivery outcomes. Comparisons with similar initiatives in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam highlight opportunities for improvement,



particularly in digital integration, performance monitoring, and service customization. Addressing these gaps requires sustained investment in technological infrastructure, staff training, and institutional reforms to enhance the overall effectiveness of decentralized administration in Svay Rieng.

Challenges and Limitations in Decentralized Administration Effectiveness

Despite the efforts to enhance governance through decentralized administration in Cambodia, several challenges and limitations persist, affecting the overall effectiveness of service delivery. These obstacles stem from institutional constraints, infrastructural deficiencies, and behavioral factors that collectively hinder the realization of the intended benefits of decentralization. Understanding these challenges is crucial for identifying areas requiring intervention and formulating strategies to overcome them.

One of the primary institutional challenges is the limited capacity of local governments to effectively manage and sustain decentralized governance. Many local officials lack formal education in public administration and digital service management, which limits their ability to handle complex administrative tasks efficiently. Additionally, the absence of a robust performance monitoring system makes it difficult to assess employee productivity and service quality consistently. Without adequate incentives for performance improvement and accountability mechanisms to address inefficiencies, service delivery remains uneven across different functional areas. This institutional deficiency undermines the effectiveness of decentralized administration, as local authorities struggle to fulfill their responsibilities and meet the needs of their constituents.

Infrastructure limitations further exacerbate service delivery challenges. Many local government offices operate with outdated equipment, including slow computers and unreliable printers, which hinder the ability to implement digital service platforms. As a result, administrative tasks that could be streamlined through automation—such as document verification, record-keeping, and online payment systems—remain time-consuming and prone to errors. The lack of sufficient office space also contributes to overcrowding during peak hours, leading to long wait times and frustration among service users. Compared to more technologically advanced decentralized models in Indonesia and Vietnam, the Cambodian experience lags behind in digital integration, limiting its ability to provide seamless and efficient service experiences.

Another significant challenge pertains to the persistence of informal practices and corruption within the decentralized framework. Although the initiative was designed to reduce discretionary decision-making and standardize service procedures, anecdotal evidence suggests that informal payments and favoritism still occur in certain cases. Some applicants report being asked for additional fees beyond the officially mandated charges, particularly for expedited processing of land registration and business licenses. This phenomenon reflects broader governance issues in Cambodia, where weak enforcement of anti-corruption measures allows informal networks to persist. While the decentralized model has improved transparency by publicly displaying service fees and processing times, the lack of independent oversight mechanisms makes it difficult to hold officials accountable for misconduct. Without stronger enforcement of integrity protocols and citizen reporting channels, the risk of informal practices undermining service delivery remains substantial.

Variations in service quality across different administrative functions also pose a challenge to the overall effectiveness of decentralized administration. While some services, such as education and healthcare, operate relatively smoothly, others—including land registration and business licensing—experience frequent delays due to interdepartmental coordination issues. Land registration, in particular, involves multiple agencies, including the cadastral office, legal affairs division, and revenue department, leading to fragmented decision-making and prolonged processing times. The absence of an integrated database system further complicates matters, as officials must manually verify records across different departments, increasing the likelihood of errors and inconsistencies. These inefficiencies not only frustrate applicants but also diminish confidence in the decentralized administration's ability to deliver reliable and timely services.

Lastly, limited citizen awareness and engagement present a barrier to maximizing the impact of decentralized administration. While efforts have been made to disseminate information about available services, many residents remain unaware of the full range of administrative functions offered by local governments. This knowledge gap is particularly pronounced among rural populations and less educated



individuals, who may continue to rely on traditional bureaucratic channels rather than utilizing the decentralized services. Additionally, the feedback mechanisms in place—such as suggestion boxes and periodic surveys—are underutilized, limiting opportunities for service users to voice concerns and contribute to service improvement. Without stronger outreach campaigns and more interactive communication channels, the potential benefits of decentralized administration may not be fully realized by the broader population.

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that includes institutional capacity-building, infrastructure modernization, anti-corruption enforcement, and enhanced citizen engagement. Strengthening the organizational structure of local governments, investing in digital service platforms, and reinforcing accountability mechanisms can help mitigate inefficiencies and improve service delivery outcomes. The following section will explore policy implications and recommendations aimed at overcoming these limitations and enhancing the effectiveness of decentralized administration in Cambodia.

Policy Implications and Recommendations for Improving Decentralized Administration in Cambodia

Based on the findings of this review, several policy implications and recommendations can be drawn to enhance the effectiveness of decentralized administration in Cambodia. These recommendations are grounded in the identified challenges and limitations discussed earlier, focusing on institutional capacity-building, digital transformation, anti-corruption measures, and citizen engagement strategies. Implementing these interventions can help address inefficiencies, improve service delivery, and strengthen public trust in government institutions.

Strengthening Institutional Capacity and Human Resource Development

One of the primary institutional challenges affecting decentralized administration in Cambodia is the limited capacity of local governments to manage complex administrative procedures efficiently. To address this issue, a structured capacity-building program should be introduced to enhance the skills and knowledge of local officials. Training initiatives should focus on public administration best practices, digital service management, and customer service techniques to improve overall service delivery. Additionally, recruitment policies should prioritize hiring individuals with formal education in public administration or related fields, ensuring that local government staff possess the necessary qualifications to perform their duties effectively.

Furthermore, the establishment of a performance monitoring system is essential for evaluating employee productivity and service quality. This system should include key performance indicators (KPIs) such as processing times, error rates, and citizen satisfaction scores. Regular evaluations based on these metrics can help identify areas needing improvement and provide incentives for high-performing staff. Additionally, introducing performance-based incentives, such as recognition awards or career advancement opportunities, can motivate employees to maintain high service standards.

Investing in Digital Infrastructure and Technological Integration

The reliance on manual administrative processes significantly hinders the efficiency and scalability of decentralized administration in Cambodia. To overcome this limitation, the government should invest in digital infrastructure and implement integrated service platforms. Adopting electronic document management systems, automated workflow software, and online service portals can streamline administrative tasks, reduce processing times, and minimize human errors.

A key priority should be the development of a centralized database that connects various government departments involved in decentralized administration. This database would enable real-time data sharing between agencies responsible for land registration, taxation, business licensing, and civil documentation. By eliminating redundant data entry and facilitating interdepartmental coordination, a centralized system would enhance service accuracy and reduce delays. Additionally, implementing an online appointment system can help manage service queues more efficiently, allowing applicants to schedule visits at convenient times and reducing congestion during peak hours.



Implementing Robust Anti-Corruption Measures and Accountability Mechanisms

Despite efforts to standardize service procedures, informal payments and discretionary decision-making continue to undermine public trust in decentralized administration. To combat these issues, stronger anti-corruption measures and accountability mechanisms must be enforced. The government should establish an independent oversight body responsible for investigating allegations of misconduct and ensuring compliance with service delivery standards. This oversight unit should have the authority to impose disciplinary actions on officials found engaging in corrupt practices, serving as a deterrent against informal payments and favoritism.

Transparency should be further strengthened by expanding the use of digital payment systems. Replacing cash transactions with electronic payment options reduces opportunities for financial manipulation and ensures that all fees are recorded accurately. Additionally, introducing a whistleblower protection mechanism can encourage service users to report instances of corruption without fear of retaliation. Providing anonymous reporting channels, such as online complaint forms or hotlines, can enhance accountability and reinforce ethical conduct among local government officials.

Enhancing Citizen Engagement and Service Awareness

Improving public awareness of decentralized administration services and fostering greater citizen participation are essential for maximizing the initiative's impact. Many residents, particularly in rural areas, remain unfamiliar with the full range of services available through local governments. To bridge this knowledge gap, the government should launch targeted outreach campaigns using multiple communication channels, including social media, local radio broadcasts, and community forums. These campaigns should provide clear information about service procedures, required documentation, and processing times to help applicants navigate administrative tasks more efficiently.

Moreover, feedback mechanisms should be strengthened to ensure that citizen voices are heard and acted upon. While local governments currently utilize suggestion boxes and periodic surveys, these tools are underutilized due to limited follow-up on reported concerns. To enhance responsiveness, the government should implement a structured feedback system that includes regular reviews of citizen complaints and actionable plans for service improvement. Establishing a dedicated citizen service desk within local government offices can also provide direct support to applicants, helping resolve issues in real time and improving overall service satisfaction.

Promoting Decentralization and Local Adaptation of Services

The decentralized administration in Cambodia operates within a broader national framework that standardizes service delivery procedures across different regions. However, given the diverse socio-economic conditions across provinces, there is a need to tailor services to meet the specific needs of local communities. Decentralizing certain administrative functions and granting greater autonomy to local governments can enable more responsive and adaptable service provision.

For instance, local governments could introduce specialized services that streamline procedures for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), supporting local economic growth by reducing bureaucratic barriers for entrepreneurs. Collaborating with neighboring authorities to harmonize documentation requirements and processing times can further enhance efficiency for cross-border transactions. Additionally, expanding the scope of service offerings to include support for vulnerable populations—such as women, youth, and marginalized communities—can promote inclusive development and ensure that all citizens benefit from decentralized administration.

By implementing these policy recommendations, the Royal Government of Cambodia can significantly enhance the effectiveness of its decentralized administration. Strengthening institutional capacity, investing in digital infrastructure, enforcing anti-corruption measures, and promoting citizen engagement are essential steps toward achieving more efficient, transparent, and citizen-centric governance.



CONCLUSION

This review has provided a comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of decentralized administration in Cambodia, highlighting both its achievements and challenges. The decentralization reforms initiated in the early 2000s aimed to enhance governance efficiency, empower local authorities, and improve service delivery. The legal framework established through the Law on Administrative Management of Capital, Provinces, Municipalities, Districts, and Khans (2008) and the Sub-Decree on Commune/Sangkat Administrative Management (2009) laid the groundwork for transferring administrative responsibilities, financial resources, and decision-making authority to subnational levels.

Key findings from this review indicate that while decentralized administration has successfully simplified administrative procedures and improved service accessibility, its effectiveness is hindered by inadequate staffing, limited technological integration, and inconsistent enforcement of standardized procedures. Comparative analyses with similar initiatives in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam reveal that more digitally advanced and institutionally supported decentralized models achieve higher levels of efficiency and user satisfaction. These comparisons underscore the importance of investing in digital infrastructure, strengthening institutional capacity, and implementing robust anti-corruption measures to maximize the benefits of decentralized administration.

Future research on decentralized administration in Cambodia should focus on several key areas to build upon the findings of this review. First, longitudinal studies examining the long-term impact of institutional capacity-building initiatives on service efficiency would provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of training programs and performance monitoring systems. Second, research exploring the feasibility and potential benefits of digital service expansion, including online application portals and automated document verification systems, could inform policy decisions regarding technological investments. Third, investigations into the persistence of informal practices and corruption within the decentralized framework would contribute to the development of more effective anti-corruption strategies tailored to the Cambodian context. Finally, studies assessing the economic and social impacts of improved service delivery on local communities, particularly small businesses and marginalized populations, could further justify continued investment in decentralized administration initiatives.

By addressing these research gaps, future studies can contribute to the ongoing refinement of decentralized administration models, ensuring that they fulfill their intended role in enhancing governance and citizen satisfaction in Cambodia.

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