

**Report:
Community Mobilisation Strategies in Cambodia**

Stephan Sonnenberg, JD
29 June 2016, LunchTimeSeries

At the last LunchTimeSeries on Law, Technology and Society (LTS), Mr Stephan Sonnenberg, JD, talked about 'Community mobilisation strategies in Cambodia'. Currently, Mr Sonnenberg works as the Associate Dean of Experiential Education and Director of the ADR Clinic at Bhu-tan's first law school, the Jigme Singye Wangchuck School of Law. Before that, among other occupations, he supervised a research initiative in collaboration with LICADHO, the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights.

The team around Mr Sonnenberg, coming from the International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic at Stanford, focused on finding models for successful mobilisation strategies in Cambodia. Realising that international aid often leads to an unwanted decrease in community-generated activity, they tried to figure out how NGOs could provide support without undermining community structures.

As an introduction, Mr Sonnenberg gave a brief overview of Cambodian history, which is deeply scarred by the reign of the Khmer Rouge (1975 – 1979). Today considered genocidal, this regime disrupted Cambodian society and led to death and displacement throughout the country. Many political and economic developments can be tracked to decisions made by the Khmer Rouge, such as the resettling of urban population to agrarian environments.

Mr Sonnenberg continued by focusing on three main human rights issues: labour and workers' rights, land rights and corruption. Workers' and labour rights show tight connections to the international garment industry. Many desperate people – mostly young women – coming from rural areas to the capital city of Phnom Penh are exploited in the factories of global players such as H&M, C&A and many more. Underlying issues concerning land rights are partly rooted in the displacement undertaken by the Khmer Rouge. Most people do not hold land titles, and even if they do, they are often not recognised. This enables so-called 'land grabbing' by foreign investors, which is most of the time connected to the third issue – corruption.

Dealing with these three main challenges, Mr Sonnenberg and his team tried to figure out what made some community mobilisations more successful than others. Through a snowballing system, they worked through a number of groups that are considered 'successful' by fellow Cambodians. This approach was especially important, as many NGOs do not share the same understanding of 'success' with local communities. This communicational snowballing enabled the team to distinguish six main factors that the 'successful' communities had in common. Those factors were (1) importance of internal organisation, (2) good use of 'loud' protests, (3) diversity of tactics, (4) mobilisation efforts that don't remain purely adversarial to the political establishment, (5) communication and messaging, and (6) clear willingness to reject offers of aid from the outside.

The factor most important for the future work of NGOs is the clear willingness to reject offers from outside. Mr Sonnenberg emphasised that many communities have their 'warning flags go up' as soon as NGOs try to approach them. Experience has shown that although the NGOs' intentions are only the best, this does not necessarily mean that they bring real aid to the community. Many people feel that their leaders become detached from the community, as they have to deal with a variety of issues to become a 'trained donor-receiver'. The successful communities therefore have set up clear and crisp demands, which they have agreed upon even before NGOs approach them. This puts them in an empowered position and, through that, they can articulate their exact needs.

The main conclusion of the talk was that the best strategy was to implement a 'messy mix of logically incoherent approaches'. This gives communities the capacity to develop strategies suiting their own needs. As a closing argument, Mr Sonnenberg stated that the solution was not about the specific type of support, but rather about how it is implemented.

The audience showed great interest in the topic, as could be seen during the subsequent discussion. The topics revolved around grass roots mobilisations, labour and workers' rights, structural deficits favouring authoritarian tendencies, and the development of mobilisation strategies being influenced by impact from the outside.

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You can find the 2015 paper by Mr Sonnenberg, '[Seeding the Ground: Promoting Community Empowerment in Cambodia](#)', via the Stanford Law School's International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic.

Annemarie Hofer, June 2017





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