



NATIONAL
DEMOCRATIC
INSTITUTE



Report on Constituency Dialogues in Cambodia

Covering the Program Period of
October 2012 to March 2013

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NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE (NDI)

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that responds to the aspirations of people around the world to live in democratic societies that recognize and promote basic human rights. Since its founding in 1983, NDI and its local partners have worked to support and strengthen democratic institutions and practices by strengthening political parties, civic organizations and parliaments, safeguarding elections, and promoting citizen participation, openness and accountability in government.

With staff members and volunteer political practitioners from more than 100 nations, NDI brings together individuals and groups to share ideas, knowledge, experiences and expertise. Partners receive broad exposure to best practices in international democratic development that can be adapted to the needs of their own countries. NDI's multinational approach reinforces the message that while there is no single democratic model, certain core principles are shared by all democracies.

The Institute's work upholds the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It also promotes the development of institutionalized channels of communications among citizens, political institutions and elected officials, and strengthens their ability to improve the quality of life for all citizens. For more information about NDI, please visit www.ndi.org.

NDI in Cambodia

Since 1992, NDI has aided democratic activists in Cambodia through work with civic groups and political parties and electoral support initiatives. The Institute's current programs in Cambodia seek to enhance the capacity of citizens and political parties to participate more effectively in the political process. The Institute works with local civil society groups to organize constituency dialogues that bring together citizens and parliamentarians to discuss local issues of concern. Additionally, NDI works to make the electoral process more transparent and inclusive, collaborating with civil society partners to implement elections programming—organizing candidate debates, conducting voter registration, monitoring elections, and training political parties and candidates—and to advocate for electoral reform.

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I. Background

In Cambodia, the relationship between parliamentarians and their constituents is weak. Citizens rarely enjoy opportunities to express their views or advocate reforms to their elected representatives, and many legislators do not regularly visit their constituencies to report on their activities and programs. Although individual Members of the National Assembly (MNAs) have made efforts to conduct outreach visits and meetings on their own or through their political parties, they continue to face time constraints, limited facilities at the local level, and a lack of an effective constituent communications mechanism. Due to such limited interaction coupled with low education and literacy rates, citizens have a very narrow understanding of the role of parliament or its legislative, representative, and oversight responsibilities. For example, in a 2012 NDI survey conducted in Kratie, Kampong Cham, and Kampong Chhnang provinces, 21.8 percent of citizens reported that they had never heard the term “National Assembly,” and 53.1 percent said that while they had heard the term, they had no idea what it meant. Additionally, 48.1 percent had never heard the term “Member of the National Assembly.” Elected parliamentarians have limited knowledge of their constituencies as well, and the Assembly falls short in representing the needs and interests of its voters.



MNAs address constituents at a CD at Ang Taphem pagoda, Sre Maon village, Kampong Speu province on January 19, 2013.

To provide an avenue for such interaction, the National Democratic Institute (NDI or the Institute) has organized multiparty constituency dialogues (CDs) since 2004 with elected representatives in the National Assembly (NA) from all political parties.¹ These dialogues aim to

¹ USAID has provided financial support for the dialogues since their inception, and the 2013 CDs were funded as part of the 2009-2014 Cambodia: Accountability in Governance and Politics (AGAP) program.

enhance MNAs' knowledge of and relations with their constituencies and educate citizens on the roles and responsibilities of an MNA in a democratic society. Another important goal of the program is to increase citizens' understanding of their political options, as there are limited opportunities for them to hear alternative viewpoints and policies from non-ruling parties. Finally, the CDs aim to normalize and demonstrate the importance of debate in Cambodia, where policy exchanges between political opponents are rare and viewed with caution.

Political Context

This year provided a unique context for political dialogue due to the National Assembly elections on July 28, 2013. Although campaigning was technically restricted to the month prior to the election, participating MNAs seemed aware of the impact their performance could have on election day. As a result, responses often took the tone of either defending past track records or attacking opposing parties for their weaknesses, and members of the opposition frequently used the opportunity to disseminate their party platform. Similarly, the passing of late King Father Norodom Sihanouk on October 15, 2012, just weeks before the first CD, also impacted the dialogues. Many MNAs went out of their way to pay respects to the King Father and to reflect on his legacy. They also used the opportunity to portray their own parties as being affiliated with and under the good graces of the monarchy, ostensibly to paint themselves in a positive light leading up to the elections.

Due to the impending election season, NDI was unable to continue the CD program past March 2013. This was partially due to NDI's own staff and capacity constraints, with three major elections programs in 2013, but also due to the tense political climate. Further, NDI staff realized the CDs would very likely be used by participating MNAs for campaign purposes, which could have led to certain problems.

Dialogue Schedule and Party Participation

From October 2012 to March 2013, NDI held 12 constituency dialogues in 12 Cambodian provinces: Banteay Meanchey, Battambang, Kampong Cham, Kampong Chhnang, Kampong Speu, Kampot, Kandal, Kratie, Kampong Thom, Kratie, Prey Veng, Siem Reap and Takeo. All provinces were selected based on their multiparty representation² in the National Assembly, where members are elected from two or more parties. Twenty-eight MNAs representing these provinces from four parties – the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP), the Human Rights Party (HRP), and the Norodom Ranariddh Party (NRP) – participated.³ Unlike in prior years, when some provinces had up to three different CDs in different communes, this year each province hosted only one CD.

2 Cambodia's province-based constituencies have between one and 18 members based on population. NDI holds CDs in provinces where representatives are elected from two or more parties.

3 Due to the National Assembly elections in 2013, there were several shifts and mergers in 2012 and 2013. Most significantly, the Sam Rainsy Party and Human Rights Party merged into one single Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP). However, MNAs continued to serve as representatives of their respective parties up until the election. The Norodom Ranariddh Party was essentially absorbed into the CPP and chose to not run independently for the 2013 election.

Provinces	Parties Participating in the CDs			
	<i>Cambodian People's Party</i>	<i>Sam Rainsy Party</i>	<i>Human Rights Party</i>	<i>Norodom Ranariddh Party</i>
Banteay Meanchey	X	X		
Battambang	X	X		
Kampong Cham	(scheduled to attend, but did not)	X	X	X
Kampong Chhnang	X	X		
Kampong Speu	X	X		
Kampot	X	X		
Kandal	X	X	X	
Kampong Thom	X	X		
Kratie	X	X		
Prey Veng	X	X	X	X
Siem Reap	X	X		
Takeo	X	X		

Members of the National Assembly (MNAs)

This year there were several MNAs sent to provinces in which they had not been elected or served. This is largely due to the SRP's policy of reorganizing mid-term: SRP MNAs were only allowed to serve in one place for two and a half years and then were sent elsewhere, the rationale for which is not entirely evident. This consequently meant that many of the SRP MNAs speaking this year were new to their constituents and not fully aware of the local issues.

SRP MNA Name	Elected to Represent	Attended CD in
H.E. Mr. Khy Vandeth	Kampong Chhnang	Takeo
H.E. Mr. Chea Poch	Prey Veng	Kampot
H.E. Mr. Eng Chhai Eang	Battambang	Kandal
H.E. Mr. Ky Wandara	Siem Reap	Both Siem Reap and Kampong Chhnang
H.E. Mr. Long Ry	Kratie	Banteay Meanchey
H.E. Mr. Sok Umsea	New (was reserve candidate)	Kampong Speu
H.E. Ms. Mu Sochua	Kampot	Battambang
H.E. Mr. Ket Khy	New (was reserve candidate)	Kampong Thom

MNAs are elected by province on provincial party lists. When an MNA participated in a new province, he or she often performed less well than the MNAs representing that province, as he or she was not familiar with the local issues and leaders and was unable to provide substantial follow-up. CD audience members appeared confused, particularly when an MNA from a different province thanked them for their vote. Although the constitutional duty of MNAs is to represent all Cambodians, parties and MNAs should focus on proving themselves to potential voters, a strategy more likely to get them elected in the future than spreading MNAs across the country.



NDI Program Manager Lee Sothearayuth gives opening remarks at a CD at Ta Sanh Chas pagoda in Ta Sanh village, Battambang province on January 26, 2013. Also pictured are NDI Senior Program Officer and dialogue moderator Chhiv Kimsrun (center left), SRP MNA H.E. Mu Sochua (center right) and CPP MNA H.E. Tes Heanh (right).

Planning and Implementation

The constituency dialogue format is similar to that of a town hall meeting, and anyone is welcome to attend. Between 250 and 1,000 community residents participate in each event, which is moderated by experienced NDI staff. Members of the National Assembly from different parties are seated at a table in front of the participants and offer brief opening remarks to the audience. The floor is then open to participants to voice their concerns, raise questions directly to MNAs, and request that actions be taken to resolve problems. During their allocated response time, MNAs use the opportunity to update citizens on the activities of the legislature and government and provide other information relevant to their constituents. The dialogues encourage two-way communication and are unscripted, allowing for often challenging questions and demands from citizens. The forum thus provides a rare opportunity for policy debate and showcases the distinctions between legislators from different parties and their approaches to both local and national concerns.

To ensure equity and neutrality and to foster constructive dialogue, NDI developed a code of conduct for MNAs, participants, and NDI moderators.⁴ The code of conduct specifies such items as the allotment of speaking time, appropriate and inappropriate topics for discussion, and the rules regarding audience participation. Local authorities such as commune councilors, village

⁴ NDI developed the code of conduct in 2008 to clarify misunderstandings and avoid confusion about the CD process and allegations of bias. It also serves to prevent verbal attacks and personal insults during the dialogues and was agreed upon by all participating political parties. NDI regularly reviews the code with the parties to ensure its relevancy and make modifications, if necessary.

chiefs, and district and provincial officials are often present at CDs, and in 2010, at the request of the parties, the Institute began providing them an allotted time to speak at the end of the dialogues as well.

Overall, planning and implementation of the CDs went smoothly this year. However, one CD in Kampot had to be cut short due to a conflict between a local official and the CPP MNA, which prompted a majority of the audience to walk out. In the weeks leading up to the Kampot CD, NDI staff met with significant resistance from the provincial and local authorities, though it was ultimately agreed that the event would move forward. With 955 people in attendance, Kampot had by far the largest audience of all the CDs. There were also well over 100 uniformed military police present and plainclothes police scattered throughout the audience as well. Unfortunately, after the first round of questions a disagreement arose between the NDI staff, the CPP MNA and a local official from the Department of Agriculture. The CPP MNA asked to give his speaking time over to the local official to answer questions. After the NDI moderator refused, citing the dialogue format that had been agreed upon by all participating parties and noting that the provincial authorities would be able to speak at the end of the dialogue, the local official became irate and forcefully took the microphone. He declared to the audience that NDI was biased and told everyone to go home because he would not be allowed to talk. It appeared that most of the CPP-aligned audience was aware that this would happen because within seconds roughly 75 percent of the audience stood to leave and calmly walked out of the pagoda. The military police then escorted the attendees out of the venue and surrounded the remaining attendees and NDI staff. NDI's program manager attempted to contact the CPP headquarters in Phnom Penh to defuse tensions, but unfortunately had to abort the event when the community volunteers and NDI staff began to feel threatened. Once back in Phnom Penh, NDI was able to amicably discuss the situation with CPP officials and smoothed the conflict over. Fortunately, this did not have a negative impact on the following dialogues.

Constituency Dialogue Partners

NDI works with locally-based civil society organizations (CSOs) or community volunteers (CVs) in each CD province.⁵ These civil society organizations play a pivotal organizational and logistical role in planning for and implementing the CDs, as well as monitoring their impact at the local level. The local partners determine the village where the CD will be held, liaise with the local authorities, and manage the event logistics. Along with CSO partners, NDI organizes CVs in each province who help mobilize citizens in advance of the event. Two weeks prior to each dialogue, the CVs and the provincial partners conduct small group discussions with approximately 35 residents in order to gather feedback on the problems facing the community. NDI then briefs participating MNAs about these issues to help prepare them for the dialogue. In addition, an NDI advance team travels to the CD site a few days before the event to introduce the concept of the CD program to local authorities and community groups and secure their support. During these discussions, NDI staff members describe the objective of the CDs, the importance

⁵ In 2012 to 2013, NDI's partner CSOs included: Indradevi Association (IDA) in Kandal province, the Nokor Phnom Community Empowerment Organization (NPCEO) in Kampong Cham, the Vulnerability and Illiteracy Reduction organization (VIR) in Siem Reap, the Village Support Group (VSG) in Battambang and Banteay Meanchey, Community Capacity for Development (CCD) in Kampong Chhnang, and Kampuchea Women's Welfare Action (KWWA) in Kratie. NDI worked solely with community volunteers in Kampong Speu, Prey Veng and Takeo provinces.

of holding multiparty events, the concept of accountability, and the representative function of MNAs. Local officials have an opportunity to ask questions and share any concerns they might have about the event.

Four radio stations – FM93.5 Moha Nokor from Phnom Penh, FM95.5 Sarika from Siem Reap, FM105 Beehive from Phnom Penh and VAYO (FM105.5 in Phnom Penh, FM102.5 in Sihanoukville, and FM88 in Battambang and Siem Reap) – broadcast CDs across 22 of the country’s 24 provinces, expanding the reach of the program by ensuring a wider audience.⁶



A Buddhist monk constituent asks a question at a CD in Chrokr Sdach village, Kampong Chhnang province on February 16, 2013

⁶ Provinces covered are: Kandal, Kampong Chhnang, Kampong Cham, Kampong Speu, Kampong Thom, Pursat, Battambang, Banteay Meanchey, Siem Reap, Kratie, Prey Veng, Svay Rieng, Kep, Takeo, Kampot, Koh Kong, Pailin, Oddar Meanchey, Preah Vihear, Pursat, Sihanoukville and Phnom Penh.

Monitoring and Follow-up

Following each dialogue, NDI develops a monitoring chart, outlining the issues raised and the actions proposed by each MNA. NDI then communicates with these MNAs regularly to follow their progress in fulfilling pledges made during the CDs. Concurrently, NDI's local partner organizations visit the villages where dialogues were held to monitor any changes that may have taken place as a result of the CDs. All results and initiatives are recorded and reported back to the communities. This tracking is essential in promoting accountability by providing citizens with the information needed to judge the performance of their representatives. NDI also conducts focus groups prior to and following each CD to collect qualitative information about the events and evaluate the effect of the CD program on people's knowledge, attitudes, and practices. NDI holds group interviews with local officials as well following the CD to gather their input and perspectives on the dialogue and lessons learned.

Results

The CD program has helped foster an understanding among the Cambodian public of the link between local problems and the responsibilities of elected officials. The dialogues provide an opportunity for MNAs to further strengthen relationships with their constituents and be responsive to the public's requests and needs. In addition, by showcasing the differences between political parties, citizens have had the opportunity to learn more about their MNAs' diverse opinions, affiliations, and platforms and are more aware of their political options. In many cases, the CDs have resulted in concrete actions by participating lawmakers that have directly impacted the communities in which they were held, including the resolution of land disputes and fulfillment of infrastructure and agricultural needs.

II. Key Issues in 2013⁷

Dialogue participants focused on four main problems affecting their lives: infrastructure needs and development; land conflicts; discrimination, corruption, and unequal enforcement by local authorities; and borders and immigration. This year the majority of questions and concerns pertained to inadequate infrastructure and development challenges in local communities. Requests varied from building new roads to providing a public market space to requests for schools and early childhood care centers. In the previous three years of CDs, participants raised land-related issues most frequently, and they remained prevalent at many of the dialogues this year. Although some people discussed conflicts arising from large scale economic land concessions, most complainants addressed smaller land disputes, often with local authorities, neighbors, or the military. This indicates the continued insecure state of land ownership in Cambodia.

Corruption, discrimination, and justice concerns appeared more often than in past years. Issues were often phrased ambiguously, with broader questions about the application of the law; for

⁷ These "key issues" represent the most frequently raised issues by participants at the dialogues; this does not constitute a value judgment from NDI. Full reports of each dialogue are available upon request, in English.

example, why “justice is reserved for the rich and powerful.” Issues of justice were often raised simultaneously with issues of land rights. Finally, concerns related to immigration, borders, and relations with neighboring countries were raised significantly more than in prior years. Questions predominantly concerned mass migration abroad for labor and the impact this continues to have on local communities and economies. Across all four issues in each province, participants expressed frustration with the perception that the interests of ordinary Cambodians, especially the poor, consistently lose out to the interests of government officials, private companies, and foreign entities.

A. Infrastructure and Development

In this year’s CDs, participants raised questions and concerns related to a variety of infrastructure and development issues, including physical infrastructure, social services, and economic growth. A significant portion of citizens’ comments included requests to address specific infrastructure deficiencies, including inadequate roads, problems with dams and other irrigation challenges, and insufficient schools and hospitals. Citizens also inquired about the role of the government in Cambodia’s market economy. Farmers complained about difficulties getting their agricultural products to market at prices that could support them and their families. Other participants lamented the high cost of agricultural inputs, like electricity and oil.

Questions about social services included complaints about poor access to and quality of healthcare, low wages for factory workers and public sector employees, and inadequate social security, especially for the poor and the elderly. Some participants asked for the national government to intervene in instances where local authorities were failing to deliver basic services. In addition, several questions about social services, directed at the opposition parties, asked for clarification about campaign promises to institute minimum wages for factory workers and civil servants and social security payments for senior citizens.

Members of the National Assembly responded to many of these questions and concerns with promises to bring complaints to the relevant local authorities and government ministries. MNAs from the ruling CPP frequently touted their economic and infrastructural achievements to date, boasting of Cambodia’s impressive economic growth since the fall of the Khmer Rouge and the construction of many schools and hospitals donated by Prime Minister Hun Sen, his wife Bun Rany (who is also the president of the Cambodian Red Cross), and other senior CPP figures. Moreover, when it came to complaints about the low market price of agricultural goods in contrast to the high price of fuel, electricity, and imported agricultural products (fertilizer, pesticides, etc.), many CPP representatives explained that Cambodia followed a “free enterprise and free market economy” and therefore they had no control over the price of goods and no authority to intervene in the market. This argument was frequently challenged by the SRP and HRP representatives, however, when they pointed out that neighboring Thailand and Vietnam had both achieved much higher development and growth rates partially due to economic interventions, specifically subsidizing the cost of fuel and electricity and actively engaging in price controls for exported goods.

Members of the National Assembly from the SRP and the HRP, on the other hand, questioned the effectiveness of CPP policies in addressing infrastructure demands and development challenges. In addition, several SRP and HRP MNAs used the opportunity to present the

platform of the newly-formed Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), suggesting that if they were to be elected the CNRP would better allocate funds for development. For example, in Banteay Meanchey, when a request for an elderly care center was raised, the SRP MNA responded by discussing the CNRP campaign promise to provide 40,000 riel per month in aid to all elderly citizens. The SRP MNA in Battambang laid out the CNRP's platform to invest in the agricultural sector and specifically in advancing the technological recourses of farmers. She also suggested that credit and the cycle of debt in which many farmers were caught would be addressed by CNRP by negotiating with microfinance institutions to control interest rates. Overall, opposition MNAs argued that the achievements over the past 30-plus years were not particularly impressive when measured against other post-conflict societies from the region and considering the amount of aid inflows.



A constituent asks a question at a CD in Sre Maon Village, Kampong Speu Province on January 19, 2013.

B. Land Conflicts

While land conflicts were not as prevalent in this year's CDs as in previous years, important land-related issues were raised in 11 of the 12 provinces where events were held. These issues included economic land concessions (ELCs), illegal land seizures, land disputes between neighbors, and deforestation. Several participants complained about the negative impact ELCs had on ordinary Cambodians. They questioned why many of the ELCs were granted to foreign companies and why the concessions were 99 years long. Moreover, many participants felt it was unfair for so much land to be given to private companies at low prices, while many poor Cambodians did not have enough land to farm and build homes. They urged the MNAs to grant more social land concessions to the people.

In addition to complaints about the negative effects of legally granted ELCs, several participants also explained that they were the victims of illegal government land seizures. For example, a participant from Kampong Chhnang described how a group of soldiers cleared and took control of several hundred hectares of land in his commune. Similarly, a man from Banteay Meanchey claimed he had been in a 740 hectare land dispute with seven soldiers since 2004. A blind participant from Kampong Cham alleged that his commune councilor grabbed his land, destroyed his property, and used violence against him. A participant from Takeo said that his village chief forcibly took his land in order to build a road and provided no compensation. Moreover, corruption within the land titling scheme was raised a few times. A deputy chief in Battambang province claimed that village and commune chiefs took bribes between 150,000 and 200,000 riel to issue land titles, work that was supposed to be done for free by volunteer students.



A man in Kandal province described a land conflict with his neighbor who is the second deputy chief of the commune from the HRP. He filed a complaint to the commune but no solution was offered. Rather, the second deputy commune chief threatened him, saying, "If I were the commune chief, I would arrest you for complaining against me."



However, countrywide, most land issues raised involved personal disputes with neighbors and local companies, reflecting how the lack of land ownership documents continues to affect Cambodians. Multiple participants asked MNAs to help expedite the arbitration of land disputes with neighbors. For example, a participant from Kampong Chhnang alleged that his land was sold by another man from his commune. Complaints about deforestation were also raised several times. Citizens urged MNAs and local officials at the event to do more to protect the forests by providing more resources and better education to counter deforestation.

CPP MNAs generally defended the government's ELC policy, emphasizing that it promoted investment, development, and growth. They tried to reassure their constituents, promising that any company that breaks the law or breaches the terms of their ELC would be prosecuted and lose the land they were given. They also urged constituents currently embroiled in land conflicts to "be patient" and to trust the judicial system. HRP and SRP MNAs were more critical of existing ELC policy, calling for the review of all existing concessions and for future ELCs to be sold at a significantly higher cost for shorter periods of time in order to increase national revenue. HRP and SRP MNAs also agreed with participants that the government should grant more social land concessions to the poor. Responding to allegations of illegal land seizures and complaints of other land disputes, MNAs from all participating parties pledged to examine the participants' concerns and urged the local authorities to take appropriate action.

C. Discrimination, Corruption, and Justice

In addition to complaints about government involvement in illegal land seizures, many participants discussed other forms of corruption, unequal application of the law, and poor law enforcement. Many participants described instances in which law enforcement authorities

shirked their responsibilities. For example, citizens in several provinces discussed the problem of illegal fish “shocking” (using electric currents to stun or kill fish) and some participants alleged government complicity in illegal fishing activities. Other participants complained that wealthy and well-connected people received special treatment from law enforcement and government officials. For example, one participant accused the police of setting up illegal checkpoints and fining ordinary Cambodians for spurious crimes but allowing the “powerful” to operate illegal activities with impunity. Additionally, many opposition SRP and HRP activists complained that they were discriminated against by the largely CPP-aligned local authorities and by community members who were intimidated by the CPP authorities.

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A man in Takeo province described a criminal case that had continued to trouble a community: he explained that in April 2009, over Khmer New Year, a youth gang publicly beat a person to death, yet had still not been charged. He worried that the perpetrators were colluding with the authorities and had paid them off because one youth came from a wealthy family. He asked, “Is justice only for the rich and for the friends of people with power?”

• • •



Hak Mong Huort, governor of Baray district in Kampong Thom province, responds to issues raised at a CD on March 30, 2013.

CPP MNAs responded to most complaints related to discrimination, corruption, and justice with commitments to examine the specific cases and refer them to the local authorities. Several SRP and HRP MNAs, on the other hand, emphasized the anti-corruption components of the CNRP’s platform, including their plan to increase civil servant wages to disincentivize graft. In Battambang, the SRP MNA addressed the CNRP promise to raise civil servant wages to decrease public sector corruption and to encourage civil servants to work better.



In Banteay Meanchey, the SRP MNA used the opportunity to raise election issues as well. He referenced the complicated voter registration process and highlighted this as evidence that the ruling party wanted to keep citizen participation minimal. He stated that, in a democracy, citizens were meant to be the source of power and declared that, “citizens deserve the right, as enshrined in the constitution, to participate in politics and build the country’s democracy.”



D. Borders and Immigration

In this year’s CDs, questions and concerns related to borders and immigration were raised frequently. The most common concern was the fear of an influx of illegal immigrants, particularly from Vietnam, and a perception that foreign workers and businesses, especially Vietnamese, were harming job and business opportunities for Khmer Cambodians. Several participants also had concerns related to the border demarcation process and feared the possibility of Cambodia’s territory being encroached upon by its neighbors. For example, one man in Kampong Thom argued that Vietnamese people were “taking the jobs of Cambodians” and blamed them for Cambodia’s high unemployment rate. Another man in Kampong Chhnang was deeply concerned that neighboring countries were conspiring to take Cambodia’s territory and asked the MNAs how they would protect Cambodia’s borders. Thinking ahead to the National Assembly elections, he also asked if Vietnamese people living in Cambodia had the right to vote and what the MNAs would do to stop illegal Vietnamese immigrants from entering Cambodia.



In Kampong Cham, not in response to any particular question, the SRP MNA stated that he had recently visited Kampong Chhnang province and claimed to have seen lots of “Vietnamese” people living in the Kang Rei lake area. He accused them of using “fake” Khmer names, throwing trash and liquid waste in the water, and acting disorderly.



MNAs from all parties emphasized the distinction between legal and illegal immigrants, affirming the rights of legal immigrants while committing to combat illegal immigration. Some SRP MNAs were critical of the lack of transparency and of the involvement of civil society in the border demarcation process. However, as the elections grew nearer, it became increasingly evident that the CNRP was using anti-Vietnamese sentiment to bolster support. This has been a longstanding focus of the SRP and therefore it was not entirely surprising that during the CDs there were a few times in which the SRP candidates stoked xenophobic fears. In Prey Veng, the SRP MNA accused Vietnamese companies of being responsible for land grabs.

Additionally, concerns about the safety of Cambodian migrant workers abroad were raised much more frequently this year than in the past. In a typical example, a young teenage girl in Kandal province discussed her older sister, who was sent by a company to work in Malaysia but had not been heard from in months. She tearfully pleaded with the MNAs to help find her sister and bring her back home. In response to issues raised about migrant workers, the MNAs all concluded that it was the government's job to both promote the domestic economy so fewer Cambodians must leave to find work, but also to ensure their citizens safety abroad. However, when it came to actually addressing this issue concretely, most MNAs deflected responsibility and said they would contact NGOs to intervene.



At Moth Krasal Khnung pagoda in Kdei Kandal village, Kandal province on December 1, 2012, a young girl tearfully pleads with the MNAs to help her find her missing sister who had not been heard from since migrating to Malaysia.

III. Focus Group Findings

Focus groups were held with citizens before and after a CD event and were designed to elicit opinions and perceptions through a series of questions and a word association section. The focus groups explored the following areas: attitudes towards and confidence in the National Assembly and its members, community problem solving, perceptions and expectations of elected officials and political parties, and feedback on the dialogues. An NDI moderator directed the discussions using a pre-defined list of questions. NDI conducted the focus groups in Khmer and recorded the proceedings; the Institute later transcribed the recordings and translated them into English.

Twelve focus group discussions with 176 Cambodian citizens, 73 male and 103 female, were conducted in 2013 in Kratie, Banteay Meanchey, Kampong Cham, Battambang, Kampong Chhnang, Kampong Thom, Prey Veng, Siem Reap, Kandal, Kampong Speu and Takeo. The vast majority of participants in focus groups were farmers, aged 25 and up. The focus groups lasted approximately 40-50 minutes and included an average of 12 people, with just over 50 percent women. The conclusions presented below represent views commonly and repeatedly cited during the discussions.

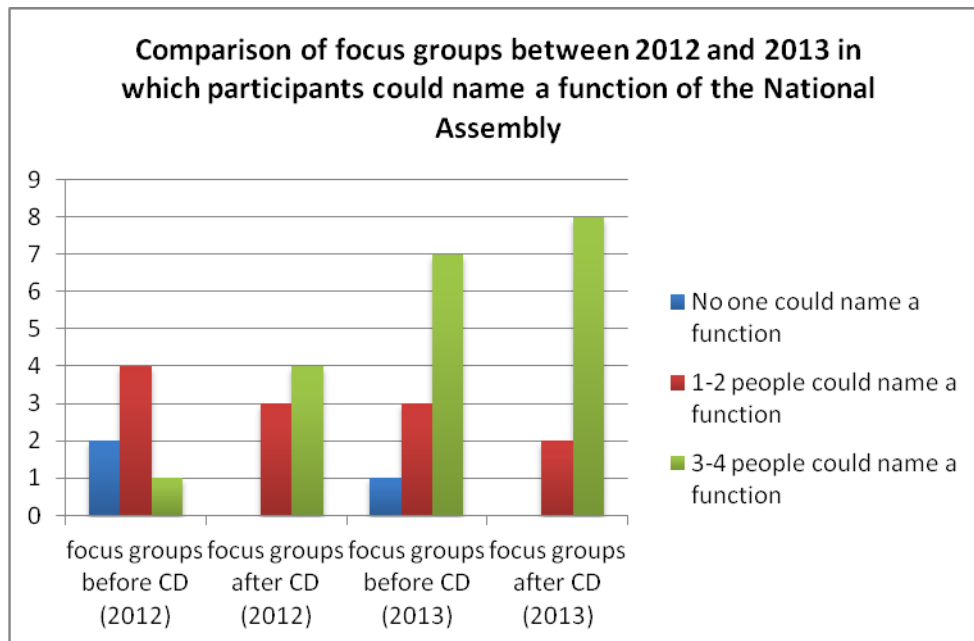


A focus group meets before a CD at Trapeang Prey pagoda in Trapeang Prey village, Prey Veng province on January 12, 2013.

Focus group participants' understanding of the National Assembly prior to the CDs remains rudimentary. The majority of the respondents in most focus groups were unable to correctly identify any aspect of the National Assembly's work. Most respondents indicated they did not know what the NA was or gave vague or incorrect responses. In several cases, people mistakenly reported, "the government is the same as the National Assembly." Some respondents understood that that the National Assembly was a representative body elected by the constituents, which was

an improvement over past years. In Kampong Chhnang, all respondents mentioned the law-making function of the NA.

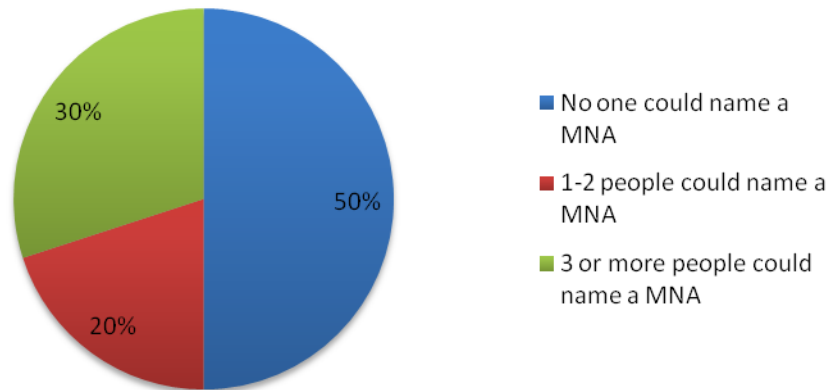
The focus groups held immediately after the CDs revealed changes in participant knowledge as a result of attending the event. There was a marginally clearer sense of the role and function of the National Assembly, with some groups showing at least a few more respondents able to correctly identify an aspect of the NA’s work. It should be noted that, compared to 2012, substantially more people were able to name a function of the National Assembly both prior to and after the CDs.



Before the CDs, focus group respondents demonstrated a vague, imprecise understanding of the role of MNAs. Many described the role of MNAs as simply to “serve,” “lead,” or “help” the people. Many respondents did not know the identity of the MNAs in their province. For the majority of focus group participants, the CD was their first time interacting with their MNAs. However, following the events, respondents overwhelmingly expressed a desire to communicate with their MNAs more in the future. In most focus groups, before and after CDs, respondents conveyed their desires for MNAs to solve their problems. All participants felt that they had the right to talk to their MNAs about concerns; however, several participants reported being afraid to do so.

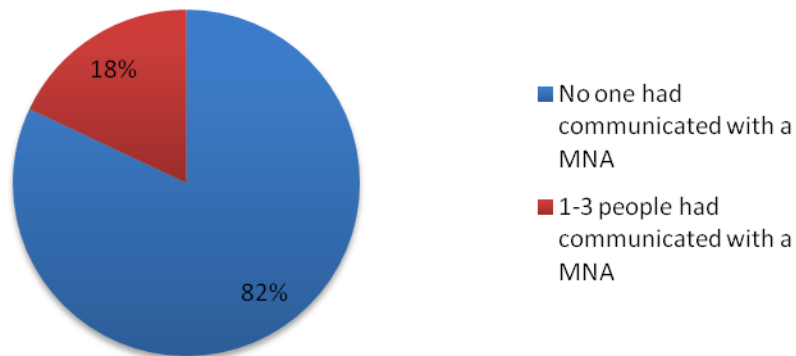
As in prior years, the pre-CD focus groups revealed that MNAs’ outreach efforts were continuing to fall short: before a given CD, the majority of focus group participants reported having no previous contact with their representatives and had never attempted to communicate with their MNAs. In five of the focus groups, not a single person could name a member of the National Assembly, let alone their own representatives.

Before CD: focus groups in which participants could name a member of the National Assembly



Most focus group respondents said that they turn to local authorities such as their village and commune chiefs and police when they have a problem. Some participants also mentioned looking to NGOs such as the Cambodian Red Cross, the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, and the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO) for help addressing community problems. Out of all the focus groups in all the provinces, only one woman in Kampong Cham had ever contacted an MNA to request assistance (on a land dispute). Despite an overall lack of communication, post-CD focus group participants recognized and understood that they had the right to bring their concerns to their MNAs. When asked if they would contact Assembly members in the future, the majority said they would.

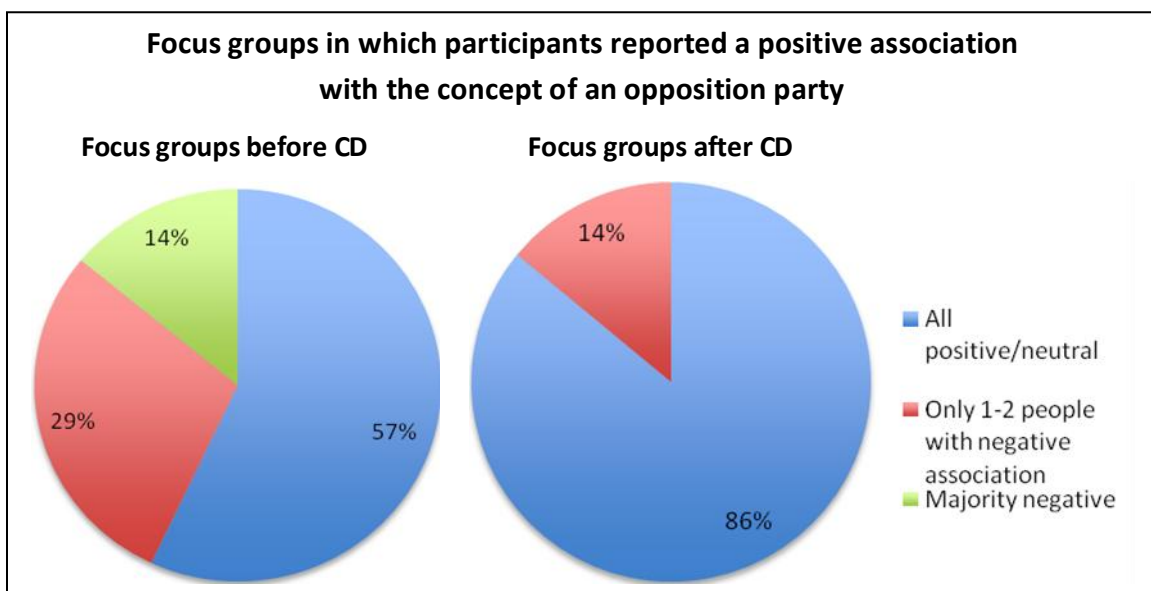
Before CD: focus groups in which participants had previously had contact with a member or staff of the National Assembly



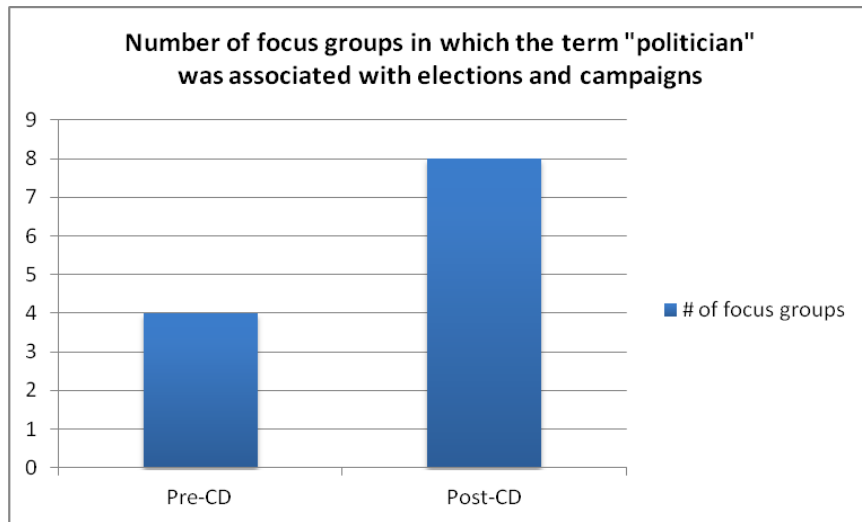
In addition to limited communication with their MNAs, focus group participants could not identify activities or initiatives MNAs had taken on their behalf or their communities, or efforts MNAs had made to solve problems. Many participants also described their own involvement in

community-building, often in the form of monetary support for small, local development projects or participation in commune council meetings. The majority of participants in all focus groups reported feeling they had been a part of the decision-making process in their communities.

Many respondents had vague or incorrect understandings of the role of the opposition party or parties. For example, a few respondents thought the opposition party is “always against other parties” and several participants associated opposition parties simply with “criticism.” At times this was expressed as a negative attribute, and in Kratie one man stated, “I think [the opposition] has no power, they just only complain.” However, many participants understood the value of criticism and described it positively as “oversight” and “correcting the government’s mistakes.” Similarly, many respondents believed that the opposition “plays a key role to correct the government when it does something wrong.” Respondents’ understanding of the role of the opposition improved slightly following the CDs. Several participants stated that the opposition was there to “correct the ruling party.” One participant in Kandal stated that “without opposition party, the government will do whatever they want.” Following the CDs and exposure to the opposition CNRP’s platform, many participants also began to associate the opposition with development and serving constituents. In both Kampong Speu and Prey Veng, constituents said they thought the opposition did “things to correct and advise the government to develop the country.”

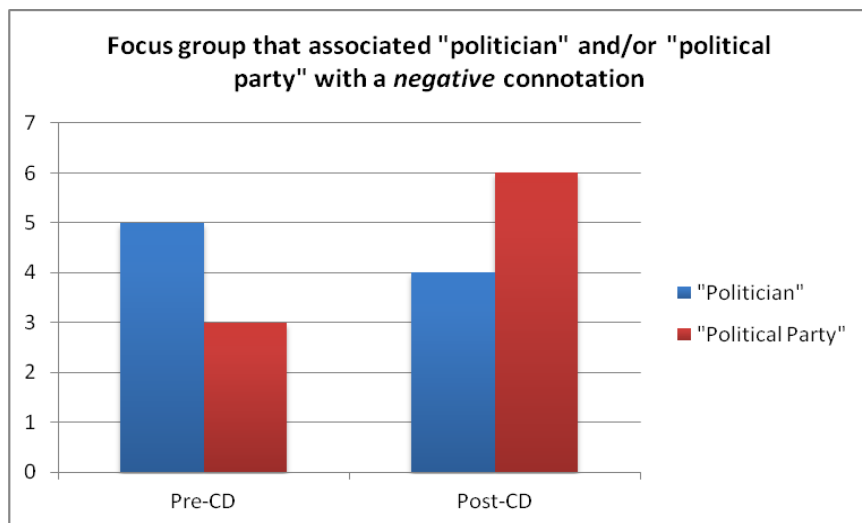


One byproduct of conducting CDs during a major election year was that constituents began to associate MNAs, political parties, and politicians (especially opposition members) with the electoral process following the dialogues more than in prior years. When discussing word associations with “politician” and “political party,” campaigning was frequently raised, as was the need to persuade people to support their parties. In all but one of the focus groups, “political party” was directly associated with elections and campaigning. Prior to the CD, based on word associations and pre-CD questions on MNA-constituent interactions, few focus group participants drew a connection between politicians and campaigning. However, that number doubled in the post-CD focus group sessions. This perhaps indicates the impact of MNAs using the dialogue to campaign for their party. By doing this, constituents were able to put a face to the electoral process.



A disconcerting trend this year was the frequency with which constituents participating in the focus groups associated “politician” and “political party” with negative connotations. The word “cheat” was evoked to describe politicians and their parties in every single focus group (a total of 13 times by 26 people). For example, in Battambang, one man stated, “when I hear the word politician, I think they only do something for their parties and try to cheat the people.” In Kampong Thom, three people agreed that, “when we hear the words political party, we think that it is a group of people who run a campaign to cheat people.”

Similarly, politicians and political parties were frequently described as “wanting power” and “working for their own benefit.” In Siem Reap, one woman disparagingly said, “when I hear the word political party, I think that all parties are the same, they only want ballots.” Yet this bias against politicians didn’t seem to have an impact on audience members’ overall positive perception (as reflected in the post-CD focus groups) of the MNAs who participated in the CD events that they attended. Whether or not this reflects a shift in attitude towards agents and institutions of the political system is difficult to tell. However, it may reinforce the need for MNAs to develop direct relationships with their constituents and, as earlier discussed, proves that their outreach is currently falling short.



Following the CDs, NDI moderators asked focus group participants several questions to gauge their opinions of the dialogue in general, their perception of the MNAs' performance, and their confidence in the MNAs' ability to deliver on promises. Virtually all post-CD focus group participants were pleased with the performance of the MNAs and felt their problems had been addressed. Most affirmed that their perception of their representatives had improved as a result of the CD. Only a few people added that although their perception of MNAs improved, they wanted more interaction and results.

Almost all respondents reported having greater confidence in their MNAs' interest in representing them after the CDs and all respondents said that the CD improved their perception of the role of MNAs. Participants' reactions to the CDs were generally positive, with most respondents describing the event as an important opportunity to meet their MNAs and raise their concerns. Almost all respondents reported receiving useful information from participating MNAs and all respondents said that there should be more dialogue in the future.



A focus group meets following a CD at Treal Pagoda in Treal village, Kampong Thom province on March 30, 2013.

IV. Post-Constituency Dialogue Actions and Results

The CDs produced some concrete results, many of which can be directly attributed to the actions of MNAs who participated in the events. MNAs demonstrated their strong commitment to their constituents and their duties as representatives, and many parliamentarians followed up on at least one of the promises they made at the CDs. The following are selected examples of actions taken by MNAs in the months following their participation in a CD.

MNAs wrote letters or met with relevant government officials to draw attention to problems raised by constituents:

- At the CD in Takeo province, a woman from Pou Rumchak commune, Prey Kabbas district demanded the MNA take action to ease problems related to seasonal flooding. Following the CD, CPP MNA Um Sokhan met with a CPP working group, which reported that district and provincial disaster committees would work with the Provincial Health and Social Affairs Department to disseminate information to people about disaster preparedness.
- In the Baray district, Kampong Thom CD, a man from Toul village, Sro Lao commune requested the water gate at the Tumnop Muoy Makara dam to be opened to provide more water to local farmers and residents. Following the CD, CPP MNA Sik Bunhok communicated with the Provincial Department of Water Management and Meteorology to discuss the situation. He also encouraged Department officials to construct more gates in the future.
- A participant in the Kong Pisey, Kampong Speu CD stated that teachers in public schools rarely come to teach on schedule, and put their effort instead into private classes conducted outside of school. Following the CD, SRP MNA Sok Umsea wrote a letter to the Minister of Education, Youth and Sport through the President of the National Assembly regarding the complaint. It was reported that the District Education Department subsequently invited all teachers to discuss the problem.
- A participant in the Samaki Meanchey district, Kampong Chhnang CD requested that MNAs provide toilets and houses to 30 poor families living in her village and repair damaged roads. CPP MNA Ker Chanmony asked district officials and local authorities, including the Peam commune chief, to study the case further.
- A man from Baray district complained in the Kampong Thom CD about the bad behavior of medical staff working in the health center in Baray commune. During the CD, SRP MNA Ket Khy expressed his concern that unprofessionalism of medical staff may affect the quality of health center services, and urged health center staff to provide fair and non-discriminatory treatment to everyone. Following the CD, CPP MNA Sik Bunhok spoke to the district governor to instruct the health officials to follow their code of conduct. People living in Baray commune have since reported that health officials are now behaving better than before.

MNAs helped resolve disputes involving constituents:

- In the Prey Kabbas, Takeo CD, a man from Snao commune asked an MNA to help him after his village chief seized his land to build a public road. Following the CD, CPP MNA Um Sokhan discussed the situation with local authorities and personally contributed 200,000 riel for the road. As a result, the man agreed to contribute his land.
- In the Kampong Speu CD, a man from Samraong Khpos village, Moha Russei commune, discussed an unsolved land dispute that began in 2001. He requested that the government send youth volunteers to demarcate and issue land titles. Following the CD, SRP MNA Sok Umsea wrote a letter to the Minister of Land Management. As a result, 13 communes in Kong Pisey district were called for a meeting with the district governor to resolve land disputes and youth volunteers were sent to demarcate the land.



SRP MNA H.E. Mu Sochua responds to questions at a CD at Ta Sanh Chas pagoda in Ta Sanh village, Battambang province on January 26, 2013.

MNAs intervened to address illegal activities brought to their attention by constituents:

- In Baray, Kampong Thom CD, a man from Praing Samraong village, Chinit commune, asked the MNAs to help prevent illegal fishing. CPP MNA Sik Bunhok asked the participants to report cases of illegal fishing to local officials, and also asked the district governor to educate people about legal fishing tools and the consequences of violating the law. Following the CD event, people reported no illegal fishing activity. The Baray deputy district governor said the local authorities had educated people about illegal fishing and arrested three criminals.

- At the Samlot, Battambang province CD, a participant mentioned that seven kinds of illegal lotteries were run in his district, and demanded that the authorities shut them down. Following the CD, CPP MNA Tes Heanh said that local authorities educated people about illegal gambling.

Effective lobbying by MNAs led to the creation of new infrastructure projects requested by constituents or sped up work on existing projects:

- In the Samaki Meanchey, Kampong Chhnang CD, a participant requested that MNAs build a junior high school in Chrok Thnort village. SRP MNA Ky Wandara submitted the request to the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and other NGOs asking for assistance; the Chrok Thnort school rector and Chrok Thnort village chief later reported that JICA promised to build a school in April 2013.
- In the Preak Prasob, Kratie CD, a woman from Chambak commune mentioned the lack of a public health center. Following the CD, CPP MNA Troeung Thavy worked with local officials to conduct a feasibility study, which led to construction of a health center in Ressey Keo commune.
- Finally, road construction and repair was a frequently raised issue, and MNAs followed up on many constituent requests. For example:
 - o During the Samlot, Battambang CD, many participants requested that roads be built in their communes. Following the CD, CPP MNA Tes Heanh met with the Provincial Rural Development Department to discuss building new roads and repairing damaged roads. As a result, a road from Kanchang Thom to Sung village is now under construction and a requested road in Ta Sanh Khang Chheung has been put in the commune's development plan.
 - o At the Prey Kabbas, Takeo CD, many participants requested more road connections to their communes. CPP MNA Um Sokhan asked the commune chief to work more quickly on this request; as a result, a road has been repaired using commune and CPP funds. People in Pou Rumchak, Snao and Char communes said that one month after the event, there was a paved road constructed from Somraong commune in Somraong district to Pu Rumchak commune in Prey Kabbas district. A road in Champa commune, Prey Kabas district was constructed in the commune and another road is being repaired and will be finished in 2014. Finally, a road in Champa commune was constructed using commune funds.

Through these and other actions, the representative function of the MNAs has been enhanced, with MNAs conveying their constituents' concerns to the relevant bodies. As one CPP MNA said at a CD review workshop, "the CDs have changed the behavior and responsiveness of MNAs." MNAs have also conducted oversight, particularly with regard to illegal practices at the local level. However, it should be noted that none of the interventions have involved legislation. Rather, the issues have been addressed through the relevant government ministries and offices. Although many of the problems raised during the dialogues certainly fell under the jurisdiction of the executive branch, the Assembly could play an important problem-solving role through its legislative function. Citizens correctly identified the law-making, as opposed to simply approving government-drafted laws, task of the National Assembly and expressed their expectation that the NA exercise this power.

V. Conclusion

NDI's CDs revealed dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs in Cambodia. Cambodians described their feeling that, although their country's economy had been growing over the past decade, development was benefiting the rich, people with political connections, and foreigners rather than the average Cambodian. Feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction underscored people's remarks, and many participants were outspoken and critical at the events. The same key issues that have been raised frequently in the past—struggles with development, agriculture, land, corruption and discrimination, migration, and poverty—remain prevalent across the country. Other than infrastructure and development requests, land conflicts and insecurity regarding personal land ownership continued to dominate the discussions.



SRP MNA H.E. Khy Vandeth addresses constituents at a CD at Thorm Viney pagoda, Thorm Viney village, Takeo province on October 27, 2012.

The CDs presented an important opportunity for citizens to discuss these concerns publicly, and legislators were generally responsive. Members of the National Assembly conducted themselves professionally, followed the event's protocol, and refrained from personal attacks and unconstructive comments. They also demonstrated party discipline, staying on message and articulating their party's positions, resulting in consistent responses to key issues. MNAs demonstrated their commitment to listening to their constituents and responding clearly to their concerns. Public speaking and policy analysis skill levels varied among MNAs, but the quality of their performance was not correlated to party affiliation. Participants appeared to respond more positively to those MNAs who clearly and systematically addressed each of the issues raised, rather than those who spoke in generalizations or had local officials respond in their place.

The CDs have also served the important role of demonstrating to Cambodians across the country the range of their political options. There are few opportunities in Cambodia for ruling party and opposition party MNAs to participate side by side in public forums and answer citizens' questions. Following the CDs, focus group participants showed a greater awareness of the opposition and the value of a multiparty democracy.

Despite these gains, the focus groups revealed that citizens still have a limited understanding of the National Assembly and its purpose. Participants were often only able to identify law-making as a key role of the NA, and demonstrated little understanding of the impact of these laws. People were even more unclear about the role of individual MNAs and confused their function with the government's provision of goods and services. Following the CDs, audience members still lacked a comprehensive understanding of the role of the legislature and its members or the legislature's connection with their daily lives. This is most likely due to the fact that the Assembly and MNAs have had a negligible impact on them to date. Few people reported having had any interaction or communication with an MNA prior to the CD. The majority of focus group participants could not name a single piece of legislation, initiative or program (such as organizing public trips to the NA, outreach forums, public hearings, visits, conferences or informational programs) conducted by the legislature on behalf of the people.

These results demonstrate that the Assembly and its members are falling short of fulfilling their duties of responding to the needs of their constituents as elected representatives, as people remain unaware of and unaffected by their work. In addition to initiating no legislation, the Assembly has no process for public hearings or in-depth research and investigation. The NA lacks coordinated constituency outreach efforts or other methods for disseminating information, for example through a newsletter, email list, or other media. The executive branch determines the NA's agenda and directs it in all matters of its work. Yet, Cambodians remain interested in hearing from their representatives and trust them to deliver on their pledges. Voters would like increased interaction with and information from the people they elected to serve them in the national legislative body.

NDI's CD program has provided an important opportunity for MNAs to build relationships with communities and fulfill the tasks they were elected to do. As an SRP MNA reported at NDI's CD review workshop, "CDs make sure that people know their representatives and give [a] chance to their representatives to solve problems." However, the CDs are not enough on their own. The National Assembly and its members would be well-served to provide more information at the grassroots level about the NA's work, agenda, and programs, and to make greater efforts to reach out to and meet with constituents more frequently.

VI. Appendix

Summary of NDI Constituency Dialogue Events October 2012 to March 2013

Date	Constituency Dialogue Location (CD)				Participants			Members of the National Assembly (MNA)	
	Province	District	Commune	Village	Male	Female	Total	Name	Party
27-Oct-2012	Takeo	Prey Kabbas	Snao	Thomm Viney	330	317	647	H.E. Mr. Um Sokhan	CPP
								H.E. Mr. Khy Vandeth	SRP
10-Nov-2012	Kampot	Banteay Meas	Trapeang Sala Khang Lech	Keatha Vong Kroam	766	187	953	H.E. Mr. Khuon Sok	CPP
								H.E. Mr. Chea Poch	SRP
1-Dec-2012	Kandal	Lvea Aem	Sarikakeav	Kdey Kandal	374	192	566	H.E. Mr. Ouk Damry	CPP
								H.E. Mr. Ou Chanrith	HRP
								H.E. Mr. Eng Chhai Eang	SRP
8-Dec-2012	Siam Reap	Varin	Srae Noy	Wat	193	267	460	H.E Ms. Peou Savoeun	CPP
								H.E. Mr. Ky Wandara	SRP
15-Dec-2012	Kratie	Praek Prasob	Russey Keo	Russey Keo	270	270	540	H.E. Ms. Troeung Thavy	CPP
								H.E. Mr. Long Ry	SRP
12-Jan-2013	Prey Veng	Kamchay Mear	Trabaek	Trapeang Prey	257	259	516	H.E. Mr. Sok Ey San	CPP
								H.E. Mr. Kong Bora	SRP
								H.E. Mr. Sao Rany	NRP
								H.E. Mr. Yem Ponhearith	HRP

19-Jan-2013	Kampong Speu	Kong Pisey	Srang	Sre Maon	464	220	684	H.E. Mr. Hem Khan	CPP
								H.E. Mr. Sok Umsea	SRP
26-Jan-2013	Battambang	Samlot	Ta Sanh	Ta Sanh	150	165	315	H.E. Mr. Tes Heanh	CPP
								H.E. Ms. Mu Sochua	SRP
2-Feb-2013	Banteay Meanchey	Thmar Puok	Thmar Puok	Neak Ta	203	185	388	H.E. Mr. Pal Sam Oeurn	CPP
								H.E. Mr. Long Ry	SRP
16-Feb-2013	Kampong Chhnang	Samaki Meanchey	Peam	Chrook Sdach	234	211	445	H.E. Ms. Ker Chanmony	CPP
								H.E. Mr. Ky Wandara	SRP
9-March-2013	Kampong Cham	Prey Chhor	Thmor Poun	Lech Wath	183	224	407	Absent	CPP
								H.E. Mr. Kimsuor Phirith	SRP
								H.E. Mr. You Hockry	NRP
								H.E. Mr. Ou Chanrith	HRP
30-March-2013	Kampong Thom	Baray	Treal	Treal	280	263	543	H.E. Mr. Sik Bunhok	CPP
								H.E. Mr. Ket Khy	SRP
TOTAL:					3,704	2,760	6464	25 MNAs	

