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Summary Report Cambodia Impact Evaluation

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International Republican Institute
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Summary Report: Cambodia Impact Evaluation

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Background

The Cambodia office of the International Republic Institute (IRI) was approached in 2009 to pilot an impact evaluation at the request of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to: (a) explore the applicability of randomized control trial (RCT)-style evaluations to democracy and governance programs; and (b) determine the feasibility of conducting this type of evaluation internally, with program staff overseeing the implementation of the methodology.

In consultation with USAID, an independent methodologist brought on by USAID and in-country research partner the Center for Advanced Study (CAS), IRI chose to conduct an impact evaluation of the Advanced Democracy Seminar, a civic education program for youth (aged 18-24) implemented by IRI's partner the Youth Council of Cambodia (YCC). The evaluation was designed in consultation with the independent methodologist, and implemented by IRI with support from the YCC and independent researchers from CAS. As the evaluation neared completion, IRI commissioned a process evaluation to better understand the implementation of the evaluation, lend context to results, and identify lessons learned for future evaluations. Testing this model, IRI participated in this evaluation experiment and ultimately demonstrated that implementing a random control trial (RCT)-style impact evaluation would require sustained technical support throughout the program and evaluation delivery.

This report provides an overview of the impact evaluation as well as the process evaluation, and includes a discussion of the impact evaluation findings within the broader implementation context, as well as lessons learned for fielding future evaluations of this type.

Methodology of the Impact Evaluation

The impact evaluation was based on a quasi-experimental RCT methodology that used mixed-methods for data collection and analysis. From the three provinces selected for the evaluation, a total of 48 communes were sampled. The 16 communes in each province were randomly assigned one of three treatments: six as designated controls (received placebo sanitation training), six communes assigned to treatment (received Advanced Democracy Seminar training) and four communes received both Advanced Democracy Seminar and Living Democracy trainings, a supplementary YCC program targeting school-aged youth on issues of civic education.

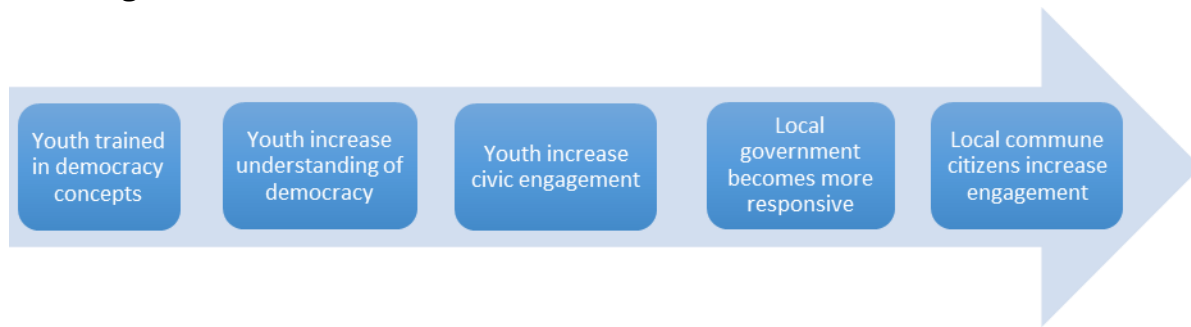
To inform the design of evaluation questions, program staff referred to the following program theory and results chain:

When Cambodian youth are trained in concepts of democratic participation, they will gain a new understanding and engage in their community by applying the tools from the training to better exercise their democratic rights and freedoms and to pressure local government to be more responsive. Therefore, the local authorities will become

more responsive and ultimately encourage increased citizen engagement in the commune.

The evaluation findings attempted to connect results to each stage of the program result chain, as shown below.

ADS Program Results Chain



Based on the program theory and results chain, program staff developed the following evaluation questions to test under the impact evaluation:

- Does the IRI Advanced Democracy Seminar contribute to increased participants' knowledge of democracy concepts?
- Do students who participate in the Advanced Democracy Seminar program become more active in their communities after completing the training?
- Does the Advanced Democracy Seminar increase commune government responsiveness to citizens?
- Is there an added benefit to conducting the Living Democracy course in communities where the Advanced Democracy Seminar is being taught? (note: this question was later dropped due to data collection limitations)

Data Description

The initial sample consisted of three provinces, in which 48 communes were chosen (16 communes per province). Within each province 16 communes were randomly assigned to either treatment or control groups. The communes were divided as following: six communes were assigned to control, six communes were assigned to the Advanced Democracy Seminar treatment, and four communes were assigned to the Advanced Democracy Seminar and Living Democracy treatment. The program consisted of a course where the content varied and was either “Five Keys to Safer Food” for the control group or “Democracy” and “Government Structure of Cambodia” for the Advanced Democracy Seminar group.

The impact evaluation adopted a multi-stage sampling strategy, which was suitable for the large and geographically dispersed target population:

1. A purposive sample identified three suitable provinces.

2. Viable communes within the three provinces were then identified.
3. From a possible total of 400 communes, 100 were vetted and 61 identified as being potential study communes.
4. Drawing from a total 61 viable communes, simple random selection was used to identify 48 communes.
5. Within each commune, youth were recruited to participate in the study.

Evaluation Sampling Youth and Communes

3 Provinces: Kandal, Kampong Cham & Svay Rieng

400 Total Communes → 100 Vetted

61 Viable → 48 Randomly Selected

1,640 Youth Subjects
983 ADS + 657 Control

Over the course of 18 months, the evaluation team collected baseline and endline data from both commune councils and individual youth subjects. The commune council¹ and individual youth were surveyed immediately prior to delivering the randomized treatment to capture the baseline data. This data consisted of self-reported community activity over the previous three months. Endline data, however, was collected at different intervals for commune councilors and youth to track changes during the six-month period after the treatments were delivered. Every month, for six-months, the evaluation team returned to collect follow-up data with commune councilors. Youth were surveyed six-months later for the endline.

The baseline survey data consisted of data from 2,365 individuals. Approximately 48 percent of the respondents in the baseline survey were women and the average age of a participant was 18.6 years old. The follow-up survey data consisted of data from 1,640 individuals. Approximately 34 percent of the respondents in the follow-up survey were women and the average age of a participant was 18.5 years old. In the complete data (those individuals who completed both the baseline and the follow-up survey) there were 983 individuals who were assigned to treatment and 657 individuals who were assigned to control. Between 17 and 55 individuals were associated with one of 48 possible communes.

To provide further insight for the quantitative data, specifically for the initial findings connected to petitions, commune council meetings and voting activities, the CAS team purposively sampled Advanced Democracy Seminar communes for focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. The CAS researchers collected data from key informants, namely commune councilors, youth, parents and teachers.

- Nine focus group discussions were conducted with youth participants of the Advanced Democracy Seminar in Svay Rieng and Kampong Cham provinces. Each focus group discussion included 6-10 youth and lasted approximately two hours.
- Eighteen in-depth interviews divided equally between nine commune officials and

¹ CAS enumerators collected commune council data from any member of the council (such as commune chief, deputy chief or clerk) to represent the local authority as a unit, rather than an individual.

nine key informants were conducted in the same communes identified for focus group discussions. In-depth interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately one hour each.

Evaluation Data Points Matrix

Evaluation Questions	Data Collection Method			Data Source		
	Pre- and post-surveys	Interviews	Focus group discussions	ADS participants	Control group participants	Commune council members
1. Does the IRI Advanced Democracy Seminar contribute to increased participants' knowledge of democracy concepts?	x	x	x	x	x	
2. Do students who participate in the Advanced Democracy Seminar program become more active in their communities after completing the training?	x	x	x	x	x	x
3. Does the Advanced Democracy Seminar increase commune government responsiveness to citizens?	x	x	x	x	x	x
4. Is there an added benefit to conducting the Living Democracy course in communities where the Advanced Democracy Seminar is being taught? <i>(note: this question was later dropped due to data collection limitations)</i>						

Methodology of the Process Evaluation

As the final component of the impact evaluation, IRI conducted a process evaluation to document and learn from the implementation of a piloted impact evaluation of the Advanced Democracy Seminar. The process evaluation drew upon data collected during in-depth interviews with IRI, CAS and YCC staff in addition to feedback from external consultants who served as evaluation coordinators and independent data analysts. A review of evaluation reports and planning documents also provided additional background.

Impact Evaluation Findings

The quantitative results of the impact evaluation showed a consistent and statistically significant positive effect on youth participation in the Advanced Democracy Seminar. These results should, however, be interpreted with two caveats: (1) there is distinct attrition among Advanced Democracy Seminar participants; and (2) behavior was self-reported. The quantitative commune council data had limitations, but suggested an

increase in youth attendance at monthly commune meetings. To further explore findings, IRI also analyzed supplementary qualitative data collected during the impact evaluation to provide additional context for interpreting the quantitative trends, grounding the program impact with insights from commune councilors and active Advanced Democracy Seminar graduates. Findings from the quantitative and qualitative inquiries are as follows.

Does the Advanced Democracy Seminars contribute to an increase in participants' knowledge of democracy concepts?

- ***Quantitative:*** The data exhibited statistically significant and positive increase in political knowledge associated with Advanced Democracy Seminar training based on correct responses to survey questions about democracy concepts.
- ***Qualitative:*** Interviews with Advanced Democracy Seminar alumni in focus group discussions found the youth felt confident about actually applying their knowledge.

As for me, the Advanced Democracy Seminar provided knowledge, experience and opportunities for me...I received important lessons from the Advanced Democracy Seminar and I wanted to use my knowledge that I got from Advanced Democracy Seminar... the Advanced Democracy Seminar helped me know about the structure of management, democracy and civic participation of the people. So I think that people in Cambodia have rights to participation... [and I] prepared myself to attend meetings of the commune council and I know about the process of meetings of the commune council...I followed the lessons I learned from the Advanced Democracy Seminar.

Focus group discussion, Svay Rieng province

Participants in focus groups also confirmed that youth have mixed feelings about participation, and that they “fear” engagement with local civic institutions like the commune councils:

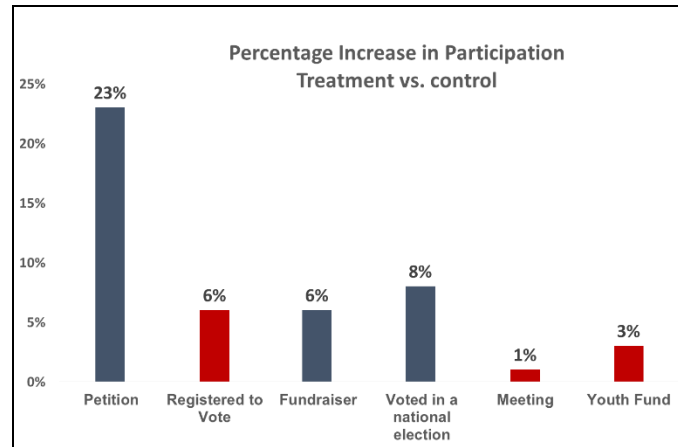
[Most youth] are shy. If they want to participate in their commune they think that they are the minority as youth, and especially, when the commune council asks them to have a say in the commune council meeting they do not say anything and “get stuck.” Probably they are shy like this and in the end they just say that they are busy and cannot join the meeting...

Focus group discussion, Svay Rieng province

Do students who participate in the Advanced Democracy Seminar program become more active in their communities after completing the training?

- ***Quantitative:*** Experts observed a statistically significant and positive increase in participation caused by the treatment program. The tests yielded a statistically significant and positive increase in participation in the following activities: petitioning (22.5 percent), fundraising (6.3 percent), and voter registration (8.4

percent). The data shows large increases in self-reported participation (between 6-22 percentage points based upon the particular outcome variable). It should be noted that this provides clear evidence of success in the first three steps of the IRI program results chain: youth are trained in democracy concepts and demonstrate an increased understanding of democracy and desire to participate.



- **Qualitative:** Some of the findings from the focus group discussions suggest that while youth indicated having participated in these activities in their survey responses, there was confusion about the question. Specifically, for petitions the actual engagement was based on the practice petition conducted during the Advanced Democracy Seminar.

Does the Advanced Democracy Seminar increase commune government responsiveness to citizens?

- **Quantitative:** The results are inconclusive; quantitative data did not establish results directly addressing the third evaluation question. Qualitative data research focused on actual activities related to petitions, commune council meetings and voter registration. Exactly how these activities influenced the changes in the commune council responsiveness remained limited to the anecdotal evidence.
- **Qualitative:** In contrast, interviews with both youth and adults conducted as part of the supporting qualitative research indicated an expected reciprocity in communication and cooperation between the youth and the commune councilors, which demonstrated an increased governing responsiveness in local governance where youth established a working relationship with the commune authorities.

After participating in the meeting, I gained some knowledge. For example, I have a close relationship with the local authorities in the commune and the administrative police. I became brave in speaking out in the meeting. Furthermore, I got their experience for improving myself and to prepare for the next meeting as well as to become a good citizen in the society.

Focus group discussion, Svay Rieng province

We set up an initiative for the youth to join all meetings. Youth accomplish work which we are unable to accomplish such as work during dry season, during ceremonies. They are very useful, it is necessary that youth have to join our monthly meetings.

In-depth interview, Commune Councilor,
Kampong Cham

Data Limitations

IRI faced a number of challenges during the data collection process. Independent methodological experts who reviewed the data felt that the quality was sufficient to perform reliable statistical analysis; however, the final analytical report prepared by an independent statistical analyst noted two potential limitations of the data. First, the analytical report noted that the treatment and control groups were not treated uniformly enough to satisfy the excludability assumption. Specifically, the analysis report pointed to training notes that mentioned that the Advanced Democracy Seminar treatment was 85 minutes longer (240-155) than the control group, and included five fewer minutes of training on how to complete the baseline survey than the control group, as potentially introducing uncontrolled variables into the evaluation. However, the analysis report went on to say that “while the data limitations have to be kept in mind when generalizing the result, the fact that positive results were found (with statistical strength to back them up) should not be quickly dismissed as field studies and evaluations seldom go according to plan. This is a great first step and learning opportunity for future studies and impact evaluations.”

Second, the independent statistical analysis noted asymmetrical patterns of attrition in the treatment and control groups. While the attrition rate (approximately 30 percent) was quite low compared to similar studies, there was a statistically significant effect on attrition linked to participation in the treatment and control groups: individuals assigned to the treatment group were less likely to respond to the follow-up survey, and in particular older participants (23 years and older) in the treatment group were less likely to participate in the follow-up survey.

These data limitations were recognized when interpreting the results.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

The evaluation, took place against a larger programmatic and political context that influenced not just the design but also the implementation of the evaluation. IRI, YCC and CAS encountered a number of challenges during the impact evaluation, and in accordance with the second objective of the evaluation, addressed them with the limited technical guidance and resources available to them. These challenges included the tension between the concurrent needs for methodological rigor for the evaluation and flexibility for the program, and conditions on the ground that made data collection difficult. For example: political cooperation, including the willingness of commune councilors to participate in the

evaluation, the relative transience of the target research population and weather conditions that had a detrimental effect on access to certain communities at times. Other challenges were the management of data collection logistics, concerns over the quality of some aspects of the dataset, and a lack of provision in the original evaluation design for the collection of robust qualitative research to augment quantitative data, though focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were later added. Ultimately, these challenges were satisfactorily addressed. However, the challenges that the impact evaluation implementation posed also rendered lessons learned and recommendation relevant to RCTs used in international development interventions, namely those in the democracy and governance sector, as identified through the process evaluation:

- RCTs for democracy and governance programs are challenging, but feasible
- Evaluation should be question-driven, rather than method-driven
- Impact evaluations should be integrated with program design rather than retro-fitted
- Mapping and gathering data on program theory assumptions should be diligently considered
- Implementation partners should be included from the onset to ensure synchronization
- Sensitive political environments require cooperation with local authorities
- Reliable and creative data collection methods must be developed to verify outcomes
- A cost benefit analysis should be conducted before committing resources needed to address evaluation questions

The impact evaluation experience also triggered a greater institutional appreciation among program staff for measuring program outcomes as well as exploring monitoring and evaluation methods. Before the impact evaluation, program activities were monitored and outputs were regularly tracked; however, assessing outcomes that led to long-term impact was layers beyond the IRI and YCC's monitoring and evaluation practices at that time. Program staff also realized that measuring youth behavior change was key to understanding the effectiveness of the Advanced Democracy Seminar.

Acknowledgements

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