



# Citizens' participation and local governance in South East Asia

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Workshop of the Network of Progressive Local Government Officials, Chiang Dao, Northern Thailand, photo from Olarn Ongla

## 1. Summary

Over the last four years something remarkable has been happening in South East Asia. Away from the headlines of military coups, economic crises and corruption scandals a new form of politics has been emerging – one that puts poor people at the centre.

A village in North Begkulu, Indonesia, allocated more of their local budget to health care and education; a local official in Thailand took the brave decision to speak to the media about the corruption in his local area; for the first time civil society in Cambodia developed recommendations on a new national policy that were recognised and encouraged by the government; and in the Philippines an urban poor community in Manila challenged the

decision to privatise their water by deciding to manage their supply themselves.

These and many more small, yet significant achievements have been the result of a unique regional initiative supported by One World Action, funded by the UK's Department for International Development. The project – **Citizen's Participation in Local Governance (CPLG)** implemented across the **Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia and Thailand** has provided exciting opportunities, challenges and risks for all involved. As the project comes to an end this paper looks at what changes have been achieved, what lessons can be learnt and asks have the risks been worth it?

## 2. Background

**Decentralisation** – the increase or transfer of power from national to local political structures – **can** provide opportunities and spaces to revitalise democratic structures, increase citizens' participation in politics and achieve a more equitable allocation of resources to poor and marginalised people. However this potential is rarely realised and is constantly being undermined and challenged by those who benefit from the current status quo. CPLG was an attempt to implement and reinvigorate decentralisation by strengthening the ability of people – citizens, elected officials and organisations – to seize the opportunities offered by decentralisation, to challenge existing power relationships and, in doing so, to create new forms of local politics.

*CPLG believed that participatory democracy is a viable, transformative alternative to the representative democracy that has proved insufficient in responding to the real needs of people. In these four countries it supported citizens to claim spaces for participation and take control of their own political and development path.*

Denden Alicias, Institute for Popular Democracy

*This has been a unique project because it teaches people to think about politics – to think about power – not as something you seize in the capitals but that you build from the bottom up.*

Joel Rocamora, Institute for Popular Democracy

CPLG was implemented by four organisations. The **Institute for Popular Democracy (IPD)** in the Philippines acted both as project co-ordinator and for two years, implementer of the project in the Philippines, the **Campaign for Popular Democracy (CPD)** in Thailand, the **Committee for Free and Fair Elections**

(COMFREL) in Cambodia and **Indonesia Corruption Watch (ICW)**.

### Filling the gaps

CPLG was a response to the following perceived opportunities and needs:

- The opportunity and necessity to implement **genuine decentralisation** in the interests of local people and communities in South East Asia.
- The realisation that real change can be brought about through **targeting, engaging with, and monitoring local government officials** – by holding them to account.
- The need to strengthen the **skills, knowledge and abilities of local officials** – particularly in engaging with and meeting the needs of the constituencies they claim to represent.
- The need to strengthen emerging decentralisation processes and policies with effective **national level advocacy on political reform**.
- As a first step to **persuade, educate and influence civil society, active citizen's organisations (ACOs) and governments** at all levels of the critical role that strong and participatory local governance can play in economic, social and political development.
- As a second step to provide the **tools, trainings and expertise to put this form of governance into practice** – what does it look like and what steps are needed to take us there?
- The need to support **progressive and reform minded local government officials** that are willing and able to bring about change,

and who support policies and practices that will contribute to meeting the Millennium Development Goals. Supporting them both before, and during their time in office, and to identify what strategies and support can be provided from civil society to keep these people in office, and to keep them active and accountable.

- To bridge **social movements and people's organisations with formal politics**. For many reasons involvement in formal politics has not been a strategy used by civil society to gain power. A lack of resources, training, potential accusations of co-option, corruption or selling out, apathy with established or traditional politicians and policies, different backgrounds and agendas, and the desire to maintain independence from political parties can all be valid reasons, particularly in countries where democracies are fragile and emerging from authoritarian rule. However CPLG aimed to challenge these assumptions by exploring and illustrating the impact that NGOs and ACOs could have if they looked beyond their more established role, of monitoring, analysing and critiquing politicians and institutions. By highlighting the transformative role that local politicians could play, with an emphasis on integrity and accountability, once in power, CPLG illustrated that gaining power through formal political processes can be a vital tool to bring about change – one that we as civil society cannot afford to ignore.
- Although incredibly diverse in history, culture, political traditions and current policies, the majority of the women and men living in Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines face widespread corruption, human rights violations and denial of their economic, civil and political rights. In the midst of these challenges CPLG aimed to provide a **positive and empowering framework for ACOs, people's movements and local officials** to work together. Despite the challenges, CPLG aimed to be a catalyst for change, to support the emerging patches of transformative governance across the region.

## CPLG – What made it different?

- **Having a southern co-ordinator** – Decentralisation in the Philippines is more established and legally formalised than in the other project countries. Having IPD as the project co-ordinator enabled Filipino lessons and strategies to be shared and to take a more political and empowering approach to local governance. It also enabled decisions and management to be closer to the people and organisations the project was aiming to support.
- **An analysis of power and exclusion** that includes gender – the realisation that strengthening woman's political engagement and participation must lie at the heart of local governance.
- **A truly regional programme** – From its inception the importance of exchanges, sharing strategies and cross-country learning was at the heart of the CPLG. All involved understood that if these aspects were to be genuinely realised then realistic time and resources would need to be allocated.
- **A bottom up approach** – CPLG partners believe that the democratic participation of local people and people's organisations in local politics and governance processes is essential if sustainable and equitable development is to be achieved.
- **Working with local officials** – Partners all took an approach of constructive (if at times critical) engagement with local government officials – believing that stronger relationships between government and civil society can be beneficial for both sides.
- **Flexibility** – Development failures of the last decades have shown us the dangers of applying a one-size-fits-all model to complex processes of governance and democracy.

CPLG gave its implementing partners the space to develop the project in whatever way they felt was most appropriate and allowed them to respond to opportunities as they arose. For example rewriting of the Constitution in Thailand, the development of a new decentralisation policy in Cambodia and Indonesia's new policy on direct local elections.

- The realisation that local governance work should be **political and aimed at empowerment**.

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*This project was a gamble – that decentralisation had released enough energy, opened up enough political spaces and provided us with enough opportunities for us to enter in these four countries, to advance poor people's interests and build democracy.*

Joel Rocamora, Institute for Popular Democracy

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*A notice board in Sainawang Tambon, Cambodia, which displays the local budget, amounts being spent on infrastructure projects, participatory community plans for the next year and dates of the next community consultation meetings.*

### 3. Contributing to Change – Country Overview and Highlights

*Decentralisation in each country gravitates to the Tambon in Thailand, the Municipality in the Philippines, the Commune/Sangkat in Cambodia and the Kabupaten in Indonesia.*

#### Thailand

For centuries Thailand was a highly centralised state. This changed in 1997 with a new constitution and the first mention of decentralisation. In 1998 the first Tambon council elections were held and in 2004 municipal mayors were directly elected for the first time. The Decentralisation Act was passed in 1999, but implementation began in 2001. However, decentralisation has not resulted in the formation of popular representative bodies at local level and

research shows that many people, especially in rural areas, feel detached from local governance processes that are dominated by the interests of well-connected power holders and local elites.

Since CPLG began in 2004, Thailand has witnessed a military coup, national elections and a new constitution. The elections in December 2007 saw the return of a new formation of the Thai Rak Thai Party – the People’s Power Party – that had been ousted by the military in November 2006. CPD the Thai project partner

were involved in the People's Alliance for Democracy that led some of the protests against Prime Minister Thaksin of the Thai Rak Thai Party in September 2006.

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*The focus of the CPLG in Thailand has been about bringing power down to the people. CPLG allowed us to do innovative and groundbreaking work in this area. Forming a people centred politics and developing democracy to make the country sustainable is now more essential than ever.*  
Suriyasai Katasila, Campaign for Popular Democracy

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## Highlights of CPLG in Thailand

- 1. Supporting and training Tambon Administrative Officials.** Through co-ordinating democracy schools, seminars and advising TAOs on issues of decentralisation, participatory planning and budgeting, human rights, election strategies, mobilising and managing resources, anti-corruption mechanisms, and strategies for independence (e.g. pooling budgets). A national assembly of 300 Tambon officials was held in September 2006 which developed a decentralisation manifesto. Training has given local officials strengthened confidence and skills to speak out against corruption, gain greater resources for their area and to challenge the policies of central government, particularly on the plunder of natural resources. These initiatives have also been able to create learning processes within and across Tambons, to link officials with emerging social movements and led to greater acceptance of TAOs by the media.
- 2. Establishing informal networks of Tambon Administrative Officials** (approximately 150 out of 2000 officials are members of networks in different regions of Thailand). The network in the North and North East of Thailand, the Local Government Organisation Officials of the People's Sector, is particularly strong. Some officials were previously, and continue to be representatives of social movements.

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*Last year the government ordered local officials to bulk buy from local farmers to minimise the impact of the recent Free Trade Agreement between Thailand and China on small-scale farmers in North East Thailand – they also ordered each Tambon to send and pay for a delegation to travel to a Buddhist temple to show support for Thaksin. Both these policies were refused by some local officials but they wouldn't have had the courage to question or challenge them if they hadn't been organised into a network.*

Somkhuan Promthong,  
Campaign for Popular Democracy

*There is an official state sanctioned organisation called the Association of TAO's but it serves no benefit to the people and is about advancing the interests of the civil service. Our new network brings together TAOs with a similar way of thinking to share views, strategies, pilot projects, exchanges, mutual learning and support. We meet every two months and any TAO is welcome to join.*

Banrung Kayota, TAO of Sainawang, NE Province

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- 3. Providing information and political analysis (written and verbal) to local officials** to enable them to advocate for change, linking national reform to issues facing local government officials.
- 4. Holding workshops for local officials and civil society to develop joint recommendations on local governance to inform the new Thai constitution.**

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*Following the coup there were many concerns about the violent competition over natural resources in the localities, the lack of genuine decentralisation, poor urban communities being forcibly displaced and a lack of access to information. These forums have been a vital step to ensure public input is included in the people's agenda for political reform.*  
Suriyasai Katasila, Campaign for Popular Democracy

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## Philippines

Decentralisation policies were introduced in the Philippines during the term of President Aquino from 1986 to 1992. With decentralisation, local governments were given the power to collect taxes, borrow money and receive 40% of internal revenue allocations. The groundbreaking Local Government Code of 1991 recognised the vital role that civil society can play and formalised the participation of citizens within different aspects of local governance. However despite progressive legislation on paper, elite-driven patronage politics still continues.

The Philippines CPLG programme was initially anchored in the work of the Barangay-Bayan Governance Consortium, a network of around 100 local government officials, people's organisations and NGOs interested in participatory governance and in fully implementing the Local Government Code. One of the aims of the CPLG programme in the Philippines was to scale up the achievements made at the Barangay level by the Barangay-Bayan Governance Consortium to the Municipal level.

The current President of the Philippines, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has been in power since 2001 and the next national elections will be held in 2010. Her presidency has been marred by allegations of corruption, abuse of presidential power and manipulation of the electoral system.

### Highlights of CPLG in Philippines

1. **Running pilot projects in the co-production\*** of basic service delivery in urban areas. Developing new participatory approaches to community organising where communities manage and deliver their own services.
2. **Piloting an engendered local governance programme** – supporting local officials

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\* Co-production is the process of joint participatory service delivery and maintenance that is carried out by communities along with local government officials.

to be gender responsive through training, participatory development planning and institutionalising the participation of women and urban poor.

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***Barangay Council 177 in Manila adopted and allocated budget to plans generated through community participatory planning. Through this intervention the Barangay Council made commitments to focussing on violence against women and improving its services in this area. The Barangay Council institutionalised the participation of urban poor groups through the creation of the Barangay Urban Poor Co-ordinating Council – this goes well beyond what is prescribed by law in terms of participation.***

Denden Alicias, Institute for Popular Democracy

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3. **Supporting women leaders** from urban poor communities to stand in local elections in Metro Manila.
4. **Linking reform minded government officials with active citizens.** For example, in Barangay 177 the government is initiating reforms and opening up spaces for participation. Urban poor social movements and women are engaging in the governance process and as a result a convergence of pro-poor development outcomes has been crystallised.
5. Establishing a **fund to support effective local governance initiatives** in Metro Manila – so far 10 grants have been made to community organisations to support health insurance, water and services to the urban poor.

## Cambodia

The Cambodian government has expressed its commitment to decentralisation and to developing local political institutions, with the backing of international donors. The commune's executive and legislative functions were introduced in 2001 and the commune is tasked with ensuring the well-being of citizens, including service delivery, protection of natural resources, social and economic development planning, and public order. The first commune elections were held in February 2002.

However, decentralisation is still in its infancy and implementation is problematic due to poor co-ordination between ministries and inconsistencies between decentralisation and other reforms. The lack of resources and information about decentralisation measures are also major challenges.

The focus of CPLG in Cambodia has been to develop specific mechanisms to get ordinary Cambodians involved in local decision making, to try to move decentralisation and democratisation forward. The Cambodia People's Party have been in power since the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge in 1979. The opposition is weak and divided and the elections in July 2008 are likely to return the current ruling party to power. Political space is extremely limited and COMFREL had to take a gentle approach in their advocacy. As the Co-ordinator of CPLG at COMFREL put it, we had to shout but using a sweeter voice.

### Highlights of CPLG in Cambodia

- 1. Holding civil society consultations and establishing a working group to submit proposals on Cambodia's new organic law.** This process was recognised and endorsed by the Ministry of Interior which was a first for Cambodia. Usually international NGOs are the only agencies to input on policy consultations.
- 2. Creating mechanisms for engagement between civil society and Commune**

**Councils** – through co-ordinating advocacy workshops and training on participatory development, planning and budget literacy. **Commune Forums** were held on specific issues (such as logging and health) where citizens received pledges and commitment from Commune Councils to take action.

- 3. Establishing a network of local watchdogs in 20 target communes** to monitor the outcomes of Commune Forums – to ensure accountability of the pledges that were made. In each commune members of the watchdog were trained in monitoring.
- 4. Encouraging interaction between commune officials and councillors of different political parties** by inviting them to joint events. This has lessened political confrontation and developed common initiatives and platforms.

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*The organic law consultations were a major achievement for Cambodia where policies are usually made behind closed doors – we took something secret into the public domain. People are now standing up more in local areas and we have been able to achieve real changes at the commune level, for example roads have been repaired, dengue prevention measures have been introduced and there is less corruption.*

Pharath Tem, COMFREL

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## Indonesia

The Asian economic crisis severely devastated Indonesia's economy and led to the end of the Soeharto regime in 1998. Decentralisation was set in motion in 1999 as the government's response to local demands for greater autonomy and control over natural resources, as well as threats of secession in some regions. However legal frameworks were hastily assembled and imprecise. The magnitude and ambition of the task of decentralisation in Indonesia is vast

given the sheer size of the country and the tradition of top-down planning after decades of authoritarian rule.

Local governments lack the capacity to develop communities and policy making is still dominated by local elites, fuelled by powerful political and business interests. Furthermore many NGOs still take a more traditional state centred approach and are resistant to local governance work.

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*The major focus has been to politicise civil society's engagement in local governance (as opposed to donor initiated local governance projects), strengthen organisations and institutions at the local level and learn how decentralisation can be effectively implemented. There are lots of organisations working in Indonesia at the local level but CPLG engages with local work as a political project – it encourages civil society to become a political player and to monitor and engage with new opportunities that are emerging at the national level.*

Luky Djani, Indonesian Corruption Watch

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## Highlights of CPLG in Indonesia

1. Implementing local legal frameworks and successfully advocating for decentralised budgets.
2. Setting up participatory budget planning and allocation mechanisms in 10 villages in North Bengkulu that led to an increased allocation for health and education, the priority sectors identified by the villagers. This involved local people in decision making, policy development and budgeting. Training and guidance on drafting local legislation and monitoring budgets has been carried out in these 10 villages.
3. Ensuring that activists from social movements have the skills and capacity to become involved in local elections and local governance.

4. Documenting success stories of how **marginalised groups can have a stronger political influence** (standing for election, capacity building, campaigns etc). This has resulted in more marginalised aspects of civil society becoming more engaged as experts and consultants in formulating national and local policy.

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*Previously, local government representatives were appointed by the party in power; now individual candidates can stand for direct election if they use eligible political parties as 'vehicles' to run. This means that citizens organisations potentially now have access to power at the local level, and the ability to shape policies and spending priorities locally.*

Ibrahim Zudhi Fahmy Badoh,  
Indonesian Corruption Watch

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*ICW documented success stories of activists who ran as independent candidates in the 2004 Senate elections in West Kalimantan province.*

*Muspani's campaign in Bengkulu, depended on grassroots organising. His nomination and policies were based on extensive consultation with people organisations establishing campaign teams down to village level. His campaign focused on land, protection for informal vendors and access to credit. Due to a lack of resources Muspani could not engage the media but through intensive face-to-face interactions with people in the villages he was able to mobilise sufficient voters to end up in third position and gain his seat in the Senate.*

*Maria Goretti's campaign was supported by a Credit Union and a number of respected elderly leaders in the community who saw the elections as an opportunity to raise local issues related to the welfare of indigenous Dayak people. She also raised women's issues. Maria's background as a journalist gave her strong media coverage – she was the only women candidate from her province and gained a seat in the Senate.*



Thai and Filipino CPLG staff meet to discuss the political events in Thailand, April 2006

## 4. Regional Priorities

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All partners were involved in:

- **Analysing and strengthening women's political participation at local level.**

A regional conference was held in the Philippines in March 2007 on women's political participation across the four countries where strategies were developed on how to achieve gender sensitive local governance. This was followed up in each country, for example in Cambodia a working group was established on promoting women's political participation. In the Philippines a project was initiated that links strengthening women's movements to engendering local governance.

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*When you bring in a man then only he joins the struggle but if you bring in a woman, then the whole family joins. If women do reach power then there are initial signs that they do different things to men but much more research is needed on this. Political parties are now using COMFREL messages about the promotion of women in politics and leadership roles in their election campaigns.*

Pharath Tem, COMFREL

*We have been trying to influence the way that the women's movement in the Philippines thinks about power and empowerment – to go local, to*

*accumulate power and to link strengthening the movement with elections.*

Djorina Velaso, Institute for Popular Democracy

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- **Documentation** has included the write up and collection of case studies, interviews, lesson learning and positive practice on decentralisation, participatory governance and political strategies used to influence local politics. For example COMFREL produced a report entitled the Assessment of the First Term of Decentralisation in Cambodia, Commune Council Performance and Citizens' Participation.
- **Development of toolkits and training modules** on decentralisation, political rights, participation and budget monitoring. For example ICW in Indonesia developed an Electoral Campaign Management Training, drawing on the training used in the Philippines.
- **Regional Exchanges** – learning visits, conferences and exchanges were held throughout the four years. Highlights included:
  - **Sep 2004 Workshop on Democratisation, Local Governance and People's Participation** at the Asia-Europe People's Forum in Vietnam.
  - **April 2005, Workshop on Democratising Decentralisation: Implications for the Role of Civil Society** in Cambodia.
  - **May 2005, Training on Civil Society Engagements in Local Elections** in Indonesia with resource trainers from the Philippines.
  - **Nov 2005, Exchange Visit, Thailand-Philippines** – A delegation of Thai activists and local government officials visited the Philippines to learn about citizen participation.

— **Sep 2006, Workshop on Democratisation, Local Governance and People's Participation** at the Asia-Europe People's Forum in Finland attended by representatives from CPLG countries, who had exchanges with other representatives from South East Asia, Europe and meetings with Helsinki City Council.

— **Sep 2006, Thai Cambodia Exchange** – Cambodian local officials visited Thailand to learn how to form networks of local officials.

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*We are all citizens in our own countries. We can engage and define new contested spaces for local democracy. We can build new, plural political alliances to counter distrust in traditional political processes and institutions.*

Andy Rutherford, One World Action

*What do Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines have in common? It is in these four Southeast Asian countries that decentralisation has opened up possibilities for changing local power relations – between local elites and traditional authorities on the one hand, and local movements and an engaged citizenry on the other.*

Djorina Velaso, Institute for Popular Democracy

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## 5. Challenges

*We didn't realise how difficult it would be, or how long it would take to persuade NGOs that local governance work is important and progressive – it has been difficult to communicate this and to change mindsets away from the power of the centre.*

Joel Rocamora, Institute for Popular Democracy

*The CPLG programme operates in the context of an unfolding re-organisation of central-local relations in the four countries in the region. The incomplete process and conflicting trends in democratic decentralisation rendered the local power structure in these countries in a state of flux. This poses difficulty for a political project like CPLG.*

Denden Alicias, Institute for Popular Democracy

The CPLG programme is a unique and groundbreaking initiative aiming to change the way that politics is done and understood. By its very nature it developed ambitious goals for a four year project with limited resources. There were inevitably some delays and set backs. Some of the main challenges included:

- CPLG evolved in different ways in different countries. This was inevitable given the very different contexts but it did raise difficulties in trying to maintain a cohesive initiative whilst responding to local and national opportunities.
- Overall there was more focus on country specific activities than on advocating the political nature of CPLG and its successes at an international or regional level. However networking with Logolink did increase the outreach and profile of the work on the ground.
- Communication and translation issues were an inevitable challenge throughout – the working

language at regional meetings was English but this did hamper some partners' participation.

- The original Cambodian partner for the first two years of the CPLG was the Commune Council Support Project (CCSP). The loss of key staff and withdrawal of funding from other donors meant that they did not have the capacity to continue being a CPLG partner and so COMFREL were able to take their place.
- The aim of establishing political schools in Indonesia was not realised due to the difficulty in finding suitable people who shared a similar political understanding of what was trying to be achieved.

During the project the partners faced many challenging questions, such as

- Should ACOs be providing resources to help implement local policies, deliver services and prop up failing or corrupt local governments? Can their failure be an opportunity to fight against traditional politics and empower communities to solve problems with effective and sustainable solutions?
- Is a progressive constitution written under military rule a step forward?
- Can bottom up change be effectively facilitated by NGOs based in capital cities?
- Why are social movements and civil society organisations so resistant to gaining political office?
- How can you communicate issues around local governance and democratisation in an accessible and inspiring way?
- How can you fund the development of progressive political parties and their candidates?

## 6. Conclusions

There is no doubt that the CPLG has made a substantial contribution to deepening decentralisation and strengthening links between civil society and elected representatives in each of the four countries. It has provided practical examples of what participatory governance can really look like in practice, going beyond academic theories to what can be achieved when poor and marginalised people are in control of their own development.

The risks of the CPLG – the time needed to build partnerships across four countries, the money and resources put in by all involved, the different and at times conflicting interpretations of CPLG and the ambition of what was trying to be achieved in a relatively short time period have all at times been difficult to manage. However despite these challenges in every country the partners have grasped the opportunities available to push forward decentralisation, to formalise participatory governance and to challenge entrenched local power relations.

Achieving democracy, accountability and participatory governance are complex and long term processes. CPLG supported some of the most innovative local governance work in South East Asia, allowing important first steps to be made and pilot projects to be tested.

It has been an exciting and inspiring four years and although it is still too early to assess what the long term contribution of CPLG will be all the partners involved are keen to continue to move forward together, to build on and consolidate what has been achieved.

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*We have clearly moved forward. When we started, the goal was to get civil society and social movements interested in local governance and politics – now we are forming networks of local government officials and thinking about setting up institutions to monitor decentralisation.*

Denden Alicias, Institute for Popular Democracy

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### Further Information

CPLG Website  
[www.ipdprojects.org/cplg](http://www.ipdprojects.org/cplg)

One World Action  
[www.oneworldaction.org](http://www.oneworldaction.org)

Institute for Popular Democracy, Philippines  
[www.ipd.ph](http://www.ipd.ph)

Campaign for Popular Democracy, Thailand  
**Email: [cpd\\_ngo@hotmail.com](mailto:cpd_ngo@hotmail.com)**

Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia  
[www.comfrel.org](http://www.comfrel.org)

Indonesia Corruption Watch  
[www.antikorupsi.org/eng](http://www.antikorupsi.org/eng)

LogoLink – Learning Initiative on Citizen Participation and Local Governance  
[www.ipdprojects.org/logolink-sea](http://www.ipdprojects.org/logolink-sea)

# ONE WORLD ACTION

FOR A JUST AND EQUAL WORLD

## One World Action

Bradley's Close

White Lion Street

London N1 9PF

T: 00 44 (0)20 7833 4075

F: 00 44 (0)20 7833 4102

Email: [owa@oneworldaction.org](mailto:owa@oneworldaction.org)

[www.oneworldaction.org](http://www.oneworldaction.org)

Charity Registration Number: 1022298



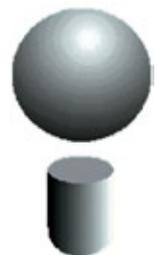
Campaign for Popular  
Democracy, Thailand  
Email: [cpd\\_ngo@hotmail.com](mailto:cpd_ngo@hotmail.com)



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