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Abstract for "Entanglements of designing social innovation: practices from the Asia-Pacific"

Dynamics of power & participation: lessons from Cambodia and Thailand

Abstract

This chapter draws on two initiatives situated in Thailand and Cambodia, inspired by strength-based capacity building approaches known as 'asset-based community development' (ABCD) and 'Appreciative inquiry' (Ai). Our approach challenges western-centric conceptions of equality in participatory design and novelty in creative process. In Cambodia, a failed experiment with bamboo furniture led to the re-evaluation of welfare safety nets and sustainable social arrangements. In Thailand, an initiative revealed a multitude of capacities among Karen migrants that were considered as important by an economic development NGO, but also revealed that a high priority for Karen migrants themselves was the veneration of their culture, which renewed the conversation about development priorities. By discussing contexts in which real-world decisions are embedded, we offer designers and researchers insight into how local dynamics become articulated through capacity building. We seek to sharpen design discourse regarding hierarchies of knowledge and power, and the factors underlying the adoption or rejection of solutions by communities.

Introduction

Both of the authors of this chapter are members of the Community Economies Institute which strives to foster thought and practice to help communities survive well together.[1] We engage with strengths-based research which we believe to be an open minded and respectful way to facilitate the emergence of local solutions to pressing social, economic, and environmental concerns. We are ontologically committed in this regard to a post-structuralist discourse of agency and power, whereby power is not a zero-sum game, exercised by one individual. Rather, following Foucauldian notions of power, it is distributed and does not emanate only from one place in the centre (Mathie, Cameron and Gibson 2017). The first author conducted action research cited in this paper mobilising asset-based community development and Appreciative inquiry tools, in eastern Cambodia: this took place over the course of one year from 2013-14 in two villages, in partnership with a Buddhist community development NGO, designed to explore the role of social enterprise in community development from a bottom-upwards perspective. The second initiative cited

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[1] https://www.communityeconomies.org/about/community-economies-institute

here, which mobilised Appreciative inquiry, was instigated in partnership between The School of Global Studies (SGS, Thammasat University, Thailand), where the 2nd author is located, and an NGO, Pattanarak Foundation, which works to support underprivileged Karen people in the Western part of Kanchanaburi province. In this instance, the 2nd author was largely working remotely by designing the steps in the process, creating interview drafts, assisting the development of focus group schedules, and providing advice to the NGO leader who was at the forefront of community discussions.

Thailand and Cambodia are neighbouring Southeast Asian countries impacted by different histories and witnessing different levels of socio-economic development. However, they have some resonant cultural characteristics including ambiguous articulation and the use of rhetoric as a means of respecting power and sometimes respectfully resisting it. We highlight the importance of being cognisant of cultural practices and dynamics, such as tacit rules governing local resources, or local customary arrangements that instigate resilience, that are not written in bylaws or provided explicitly as instructions to visitors, and nor do we suggest they are. We flag such examples that outsiders in the process of designing social innovations need to consider. We also highlight the importance for designers to anticipate and welcome outcomes that emerge through deliberative processes taking place, sometimes out of necessity, outside of the planned process itself and away from the designers' observations, which may ultimately render their intentions redundant.

This chapter offers insights to designers seeking to reveal strengths in a given context. This is an open exploration inviting all parties to embrace unexpected results. Some assets identified may have been underappreciated by locals themselves but can help new initiatives to emerge. Designers led by Western-centric norms of equity and notions of creativity may encounter cultural arrangements and value systems which give rise to different interpretations of what kind of participation is achieved (Winschiers-Theophilus et al., 2010), or different ways of how creativity is viewed (see Kim et al., 2012). Appreciating these possibilities requires openness from designers in a way that often changes what we mean by "participatory design" (see Campbell 2017): It requires a willingness to renounce one's expert position by not only "communally exploring a solution", but also giving up authority in defining problems. The power dynamics for what practitioners relinquish, such as authority and expertise, and what facilitation means (see Cameron and Gibson 2001) links with established discourses in strength-based approaches.

Background: Asset-based community development approaches and Appreciative inquiry

There are two internationally recognized approaches to strengths-based action research, namely asset-based community development (ABCD) and Appreciative inquiry (Ai). Developed as a reaction against deficit-based approaches, ABCD prioritises what's already present in a community, including skills, knowledge, expertise, and relationships in supporting community development. In short, it changes the dynamics that has been problematic in development, between a local authority, its citizens, and communities by focusing on 'what's strong, not what's wrong' (Nesta, 2020). ABCD recognises and mobilises local assets and imaginaries discussed in various fields like participatory development, positive psychology, organizational Change, and has been used in conjunction with Ai (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Mathie et al., 2017). Ai is a strengths-based action research approach based on lessons derived from people's positive memories of community action in the past. Through interviews, Ai aims to identify capacities and empowering episodes experienced by subjects, to elicit instances of group capacity and local leadership. For instance, interviews encourage storytelling, to identify conditions and mechanisms inherent in the community that enable people to successfully work together, such as spontaneous work sharing, gift giving, and unwritten rules regarding the planting and sale of vegetables that prevent competition between households. Once these conditions and mechanisms - the community's "positive core" (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom 2010, p. 6) - become explicit, the questions shift towards an exploration of how the community's leadership capacities can fuel future projects.

ABCD has been one inspiration for "community economies" thinking. Community economies thinking embodies an open-minded, diverse, and performative notion of what constitutes economies (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski 2020; Gibson-Graham 2006), whereby logical certainties are replaced with path "dependent relationships of potentiality" (Gibson-Graham 2005, p.8). Here, action research design entails an open-ended joint learning process, leading to a reframing of familiar activities and potentially resulting in new options and new subjectivities. ABCD has been used to catalogue and re-value an ever-growing variety of practices and resources, configured in different cultural contexts and localities, to nurture local capacities (or leadership), and to cultivate economic subjects by enabling people to encounter new affective registers that recognize their skills and resources (Cameron and Gibson 2005; Gibson-Graham 2006). Subsequently, locals identify and own their development trajectories with solutions framed in the context of local imaginaries of living well together, without ceding self-determination to "outsider" experts.

The ABCD approach has been adapted within co-design and participatory design practices (see Thorpe & Gamman 2011) towards social outcomes, but there are concerns that participatory design can obscure questions of social justice, equity, and power dynamics (Agid & Chin, 2019). Practitioners of strengths-based design approaches aim at democratising discourse by making local interpretations of power explicit, rather than importing supposed systemic challenges into the local community context. The goal is to understand local hierarchies to find ways to include actors who are reluctant to verbalize their aspirations and concerns. Participation in local contexts does not necessarily take the form of discussions and publicly weighing options. Given these considerations participatory design processes must be adapted, overcoming the western-centric tendency to conflate equitable participation with flat hierarchies and being mindful of people's consciousness of status in accordance with local norms (Winschiers-Theophilus et al., 2010) Sensitivity to these power aspects enable the inclusion of the design capacities of locals regardless of their formal expertise (see Campbell 2017; Taha 2011). This conscientious action is a political action, aimed at making visible local visions of wellbeing that are often ignored over time in a manner that can distribute power among participants and enable informed action. In ABCD initiatives, people are confronted with possible alternatives to existing relations that can be turbulent when making changes. The two case studies that follow are about strengths-based practices (that mobilize ABCD and/or Ai) in the context of people who are vulnerable - for instance, migrants without citizenships in Thailand and people with traumatized histories in Cambodia - but who nonetheless have strengths and successes to draw upon. The cases illustrate the importance of non-verbalised practices and arrangements that are critical to customary resilience and processes of deliberation, that are not readily surfaced in western design discourses, which are developed through different socio-economic-political contexts.

Doing asset-based research with Karen migrants in Thailand: Contestations of identity and leadership

The Western part of Kanchanaburi province in Thailand is home to underprivileged Karen people, many of whom had originally migrated from neighbouring Myanmar. Most do not possess Thai citizenship which results in social, political, and economic limitations such as lack of access to loans and land ownership (Suk 2016). The NGO Pattanarak Foundation, (from here on referred to as NGO) has been working to support their livelihoods since 2001. The NGO's most impactful project has been the initiation of a network of 17 saving groups in the Thai-Myanmar border region since 2007. This was initiated in response to the lack of savings and susceptibility to debt among many local households. Today, these associations are largely self-managed and have contributed to financial literacy among local community

members (including Karen, Mon, and ethnic Thai people). They have moreover enabled entrepreneurial activities such as the creation of cooperatives (see Rado & Thongmak 2022). The School of Global Studies (Thammasat University) has worked with this NGO since 2014 and the 2nd author reached out to Pattanarak in the following year to explore the Karen communities' own assets and aspirations. The NGO, in turn, was open to the idea as it was looking for ways to transition from supporting livelihoods to supporting locals to self-organise and develop leadership capacities.

In order to understand community priorities, focus groups were organised by the NGO consisting of a mix of participants among the Karen community, including those that were involved in the saving group committee that the NGO had helped to establish. The 2nd author provided some questions in line with the Ai approach, the first being "What are you proud of in your community?", to explore the locals' own values and priorities. The NGO leader convened the focus groups by elaborating on the guiding questions in his own words. At the very beginning of the first focus group a participant indicated the importance of Karen culture for the community: *"I'm proud of the history of Ban Mai [the speaker's home village; author's note] because it has a long history. The ethnic Karen people there are the original inhabitants of Sangkhlaburi. Their traditions and culture still exist, and the children can take pride in it".* Different participants echoed this notion, providing examples of what they identified with being Karen such as traditional use of forest herbs,[2] annual traditional dance performances, and the Karen languages spoken in the area, namely Karen Sgaw and Pwo. Another participant made it clear that keeping this heritage alive required active efforts: *"The most important thing is that we now offer Karen language lessons, so the children will not forget their own language".*

The NGO leader moreover addressed the Karen participants as "natural leaders" and this notion likewise kept resurfacing during the first focus group. Over time, however, the term 'leader' changed its positive connotation as it became clear that the participants associated official leaders and local Thai government representatives with the term, so those who, in the participants' view, had often neglected their concerns. As one participant put it *"I would like to see a leader who is sympathetic to the villagers and doesn't just work for their own benefit."* Another responded that *"I want leaders who help to preserve our culture and traditions".* This appeal to formal leadership was contrary to the notion that participants were already observed in performing leadership roles in managing saving groups and other organisations. This indicates the basic assumption of Ai, that every community has leadership capacities which need to be uncovered, but this also means the need to be

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[2] Historically, Karen have lived in forest areas, practicing swidden agriculture.

attentive to its connotations. When the author discussed the focus group outcomes with the NGO leader it became clear that being part of the saving group committees has not instilled a sense of leadership among beneficiaries. Pattanarak had initiated projects mainly focused on improving livelihoods (such as the saving groups), but the focus group sessions indicated that the Karen participants were concerned about losing their identity. They placed a high priority on this hitherto neglected aspect in development work, which might have been linked to their lack of sense of leadership.

The focus groups gave rise to four broad themes – culture and local ways of life, income generating activities, leadership, and unity – which became incorporated in an Ai interview with 50 participants to explore community-driven initiatives, including livelihood activities. Figure 1 shows their responses to "existing examples of community organizing". "Rice banks" (ensuring food security in rice by collecting the surplus from farmers) were the most often cited initiative, followed by the saving groups and Karen language instruction to the young generation ("Teaching Karen").
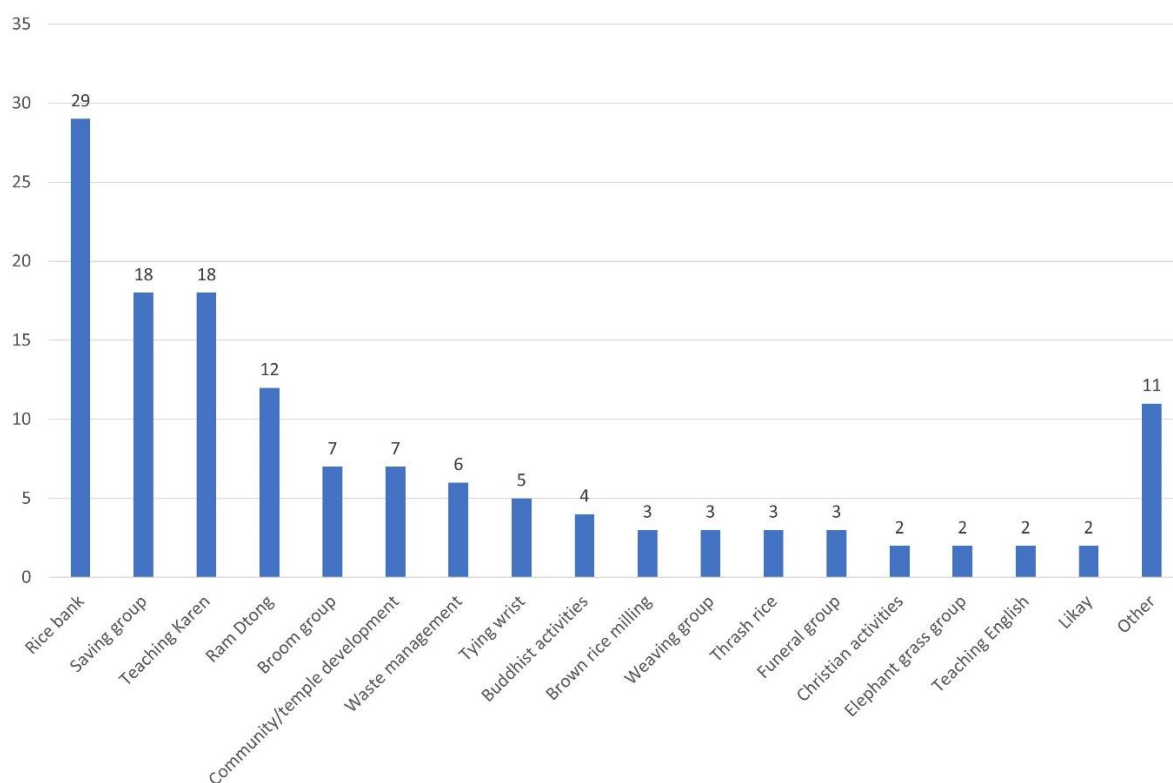

Figure 1: Numbers refer to the number of respondents mentioning the activity

Revealing diverse practices underpinning the local community economy

Most collective solidarity schemes have been introduced from those "outside" the community. Rice banks, for instance, had been promoted by the Thai government in the 1980s. Saving groups, broom making, and rice milling groups constituted previous development activities by the NGO. Although initiated by external organizations, these activities have been appropriated and managed by the local communities over time. For example, within 10 years roughly a third of all saving groups were entirely self-managed (see Rado & Thongmak 2022). The prominence of livelihood activities that rank high as examples of community organising and links to positive change, attests the enabling role played by the NGO and the transition of a sense of ownership to the community. Furthermore, the Ai approach sheds light on the local community economy and diverse practices underpinning it. Livelihood activities illustrate various skills utilised on a daily basis, such as animal husbandry, vegetable planting, broom making, farming, weaving etc. Many of these are also linked with important cultural ceremonies for the Karen people, for example, the "Tying wrist" ceremony takes place in September before the rice planting period where married elders as a couple, tie white strings around the wrists of community members to make "spirit enter their body" to give them strength for the upcoming field work. Other forms of collective organizing consist of traditional performances like "*Ram dtong*" (traditional dance) and "*likay*", a form of traditional folk theatre. Although most activities were known to both locals and the NGO, the Ai research revealed the extent of the activities and the value community members attached to their cultural heritage. For instance, when respondents were asked to expand the information in Figure 1, which initiative had "the highest potential in leading to positive change", most referred to economic activities, and 12 respondents mentioned the saving groups.[3] The second most common activity in response was "Teaching Karen" to children (nine respondents), which constitutes the main effort in maintaining the young generation's sense of identity.

In its more problem-focused research activities in the past, Pattanarak had not seen the importance of identity preservation. Solutions, such as the saving groups, had resulted from identifying underlying causes of livelihood issues such as household debt and lack of savings. Although participatory in nature, the research questions, oriented towards "hard facts", had excluded the Karen communities' own aspirations. During the Ai process, however, cultural empowerment kept resurfacing as a neglected need at every stage. Catalysed by the Ai research data the NGO realized that it had to expand its field of

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[3] The fact that the interviewers themselves were connected to the saving group initiative (two being from Pattanarak, and the third being a committee member) may have resulted in a bias here.

operation to incorporate cultural activities as part of livelihood development. This was unfamiliar terrain, but it became apparent that without cultural empowerment it would be difficult for the Karen community to feel in charge while seeing their heritage disappear. Acknowledging the value of their ethnic identity subsequently opened up new opportunities in the relationship between Pattanarak and the Karen locals. NGO staff started identifying local experts in different traditional fields such as weaving, making dessert, herbal treatment etc. Months following the Ai initiative, NGO staff told the 2nd author that they found this knowledge being fragmented: For example, hardly any Karen person has holistic knowledge in the use of traditional herbs (personal communication, 18 September 2017). After identifying different traditional experts, the NGO has sought ways to help pass on cultural knowledge to the young generation, such as linking up with the local school, as an additional strategy, so the community could pass on their know-how to children.

Challenging Western notions of participation and design for social innovation

Development initiatives focussed on improving livelihoods can narrowly prioritise material outcomes, thereby essentialising certain ideas of the economy and wellbeing. The Ai process showed that for Pattanarak's beneficiaries, keeping their traditions and identity alive is fundamental to their community economy. The same could be said about dominant conceptions of design with western, industrialised origins (like Design Thinking) that are readily deployed by organisations, but which can perpetuate a narrow understanding of 'the economy' (Dervojeda et al., 2014). Ai, as strength-based research, fosters awareness about the ambiguity of such concepts, helping to deepen the cultural competence of facilitators in forming valuable relationships (Kirmayer, 2012). For the designer, this requires constant readiness to question taken-for-granted assumptions and become a learner to appreciate material and immaterial community resources that foster local leadership. This is not necessary in all types of participatory design processes: the case study shows participatory development projects responding to clearly defined needs may be sustainable and improve beneficiaries' livelihoods; at the same time, however, such projects can ignore fundamental needs and aspirations that are not encompassed in cause-and-effect logic.

Post-structuralist action research: a Cambodia case study

Kampong Cham Province in eastern Cambodia lies around 100 km from the capital city Phnom Penh. Kampong Cham Town, sitting on the Mekong River, is the main urban settlement. Villages nearby have seasonal livelihoods, mixing agriculture with other income

generating activities. The Town provides opportunities to sell vegetables and poultry in markets. A local garment factory provides waged work to some younger adults. However, villagers close to the Town lost a valuable natural resource in 2012 when the Provincial Authority handed a lake, which provided fisheries and water for agriculture, to a local tycoon who subsequently drained it to the reap profits of speculative land deals. Also, without irrigation infrastructure, local villagers rely on rain-fed rice cultivation, yielding just one harvest per year. Increasing drought has accelerated outward migration for work.

This case study is based on action research conducted in 2013-14, in two villages local to Kampong Cham Town by the 1st author (as part of PhD fieldwork), to explore the role of social enterprise in community development (Lyne 2017). The research design drew on Ai resources (Cooperrider & Whitney 2005) and ABCD tools (Cameron & Gibson 2001). It was modelled on participatory action research pioneered by community economies researchers in a 'post-structuralist vein', through a strength-based process aimed at enabling participants to embody new subjectivities while encountering affects (see Cameron and Gibson 2005). The 1st author became a facilitator and, where possible, a team member alongside ten participants who were recruited with the help of a local Buddhist community development NGO. The 1st author worked with the CEO and other senior managers of this NGO in 2012 at the 2nd National Social Enterprise Conference of Cambodia.[4] They had already instigated a few community-based social enterprises, and at the time, they were interested in more deeply exploring social enterprise's role in community development, alongside the 1st author, from a strength-based perspective.

Following a conventional action research design, three research cycles, each entailing planning, action, observation, and reflection steps, were used to sequentially identify problems; generate potential solutions; and implement and evaluate solutions (Chiu, 2003). Over 12-months, activities included: documenting economic subjectivities as a baseline for later analysis, training participants to be researchers in their villages, and mapping community concerns and assets in the first cycle. Data collection by participants was used to generate a "portrait of gifts" – namely gifts of the "head, hand and heart" – which is a narrative means for generating and privileging new positively-oriented stories (Gibson-Graham 2006, p. 146-47), and discovering and deliberating on social enterprise, including an immersion visit to 3rd National Social Enterprise Conference of Cambodia in Phnom Penh,

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[4] After 26 semi-structured interviews, ten participants became enrolled into a research group. They offered different knowledge and life experience, while sharing an interest in community development and included three staff from a local Buddhist community development NGO, three members of Village Development Committees, a high school teacher, a petty market trader, a university student, and a young graduate of the Buddhist NGO's training, who had since opened a small cooperative restaurant.

in the second phase. The third research cycle deliberated on and experimenting with social enterprise.

Two experiments emerged in the third cycle. One consisted of the community partnering with a school canteen enterprise set up by the Buddhist NGO, to deliver employment opportunities for disadvantaged youth while helping villagers to sell surplus vegetables grown on plots around their houses. The other experiment, the subject of this case study, involved training on the manufacture of furniture from locally abundant bamboo resources. This is a deeply valued natural resource. In the second group discussion that took place about local economic resources for instance, a teacher expressed: *"We have a lot of bamboo which is our raw materials, beside this we have only vegetables for food";* a female market vendor followed, saying *"We have bamboo which have a lot of benefits… we build it up to the higher trellis for vegetables to crawl over, it is supportive to all kinds of vegetable growth. In general, bamboo always gives a lot of benefits".*

Bamboo was a recurring theme in the first two cycles: besides trellises for cultivating vegetables, it is commonly used for construction scaffolding, and for making chicken cages. As such the idea for bamboo furniture arose during deliberations on social enterprise experiments and some participants asked for training provision to take the idea forward. A trainer was procured through the Rattan Association of Cambodia, which supplies products to the multinational furniture retailer IKEA. Awareness raising meetings were attended well in each village, and three days of free training was finally provided at a local Pagoda building.

Problematising productivity and efficiency – the usual tenets of design?

We start this section by disclosing first that the bamboo furniture training experiment was ultimately ill-fated; few villagers attended, despite the partnering Buddhist NGO attracting young beneficiaries of its drug harm-reduction project, hoping that it might impart valuable skills and optimism about economic prospects. To some extent, poor attendance resulted from a lack of stipends as precarious villagers can ill-afford a day without income. In addition, there was lack of time, as we can hear from one young construction worker during a group discussion "*It is too hard for use to have free time because we have to work 7 days a week*", and from villager's deeming after all that making and selling bamboo furniture was incompatible with their need for immediate income – in other words, they cannot spend significant time on speculative activities with a *possible* future pay-off. Furthermore, another critical reason for its failure was revealed when reflecting on the project as it was concluding. It was revealed that during discussions among villagers around the time of the training, away from the 1st authors observation, the training caused concern about arguments between

villagers, and even about the eventual loss of bamboo resources entirely. In the process of reflecting on this, vital insights were gained about tacit agreements on bamboo use and people's safety nets.

For several years, many villagers had gained a supplemental income by cutting bamboo into barbecue skewers that are used by street food vendors and in beer gardens in and around Kampong Cham Town (see Figure 2). It was observing this activity where villagers could earn 5,000 riels (1.25 US dollars) by performing 4-5 hours of labour, that led the 1st author to instigate a discussion about other possible activities, such as manufacturing bamboo furniture, with increased profit per item. But far from the initial assumptions of their minimal value, the activity is comfortably performed at home, especially by women in between the household chores. While the monetary return on hours spent making is not high, it has proven to be dependable: the skewers, or 'beef sticks' as referred to by villagers, are collected by one middleman who reliably visits each week to collect whatever the villagers produce.

The 'beef sticks' function as a basic safety net for the villagers, who are without a welfare security system. Their importance was underscored in a group discussion, when a young garment factory worker shared that he lost his job after being involved in industrial action. The first thing his family turned to when he was fired was making beef sticks. This safety net is also embedded in customary hierarchy. Furthermore, the 1st author's asking whether villagers might gain more income by selling beef sticks directly to street food vendors at a higher price than they received from the middleman, was met with disbelief. Not only does the middleman know the market and the buyers and collect beef sticks from their houses directly, providing convenience but he can be called on at religious festivities or a time of crisis for small cash advances based on future skewer production. This kind of advance, called *bandak* in vernacular Khmer language depends on an iteratively proven relationship of trust between both parties (Phlong 2009). In summary, the profits from beef stick making might appear 'unproductive' in a capitalist frame, however, the villagers' relations with the middleman is a deeply trusted and legitimate relationship.

Figure 2 Bamboo skewers, relationships, and safety nets: manufactured skewers are left to dry and bundled for collection by the middle-seller, who provides a modest payment

Perhaps of greatest importance to the villagers, is that this collective agreement over the use of resources, does not compel their economic engagement collectively. Far from being a "common resource", bamboo plots around the villagers are the individual property of different households. However, tacit protocols of commoning – or "protocols for sharing access [and] use" (Gibson-Graham, et al., 2013, p. 138) – are enacted. If one household uses its bamboo supply but needs emergency income, a request to borrow bamboo from another plot will not be refused. But nonetheless, each household could have their own individual relationship with the middleman who collects their beef sticks: In other words, people could provide for their family and live peacefully side by side without having to engage in collective business relationships. This dynamic is critically important in these two villages which lie less than two kilometres from a Pagoda set between two hills, Wat Phnom Pros and Wat Phnom Srey: in 1977-78, this was a killing field where more than 10,000 people met their death under the Khmer Rouge regime that forced people to labour collectively on farming rice or on construction duties for dams and irrigation works (Hinton 2005). The enduring trauma of the time was documented in the locality 25 years later (Dubois et al., 2004).

Highlighting alternative agendas in designing social innovation

Strength-based research, when done well, is participatory and can amplify communities' potentials and aspirations. As seen in both case studies, outside agents (NGOs and researchers) are acting as facilitators that introduce methods to support a community-led development process, but these are interventions that demand heightened vigilance, especially when done under the guise of self-determination, empowerment, and community development. In other words, the "worthiness" of intention for economic development can risk occluding valuable cultural practices, as the examples demonstrate. Similarly, design imbued with western, democratic ideals in equality, choice and individual rights for empowerment can be carried into communities, inadvertently disrupting social and cultural fabrics (Winschiers-Theophilus et al., 2010). This invites some pause to consider the call for "disruptive solutions" that are celebrated in social innovation (Dervojeda et al., 2014).

ABCD and Ai are tools that can transcend familiar framings and resist strong assumptions. Rather, local realities and pathways to change can take precedence when an NGO is enabled to critically question the reasoning for an intervention based on a more informed understanding of local priorities – as in the Thailand case study, or when people encounter and embody new subjectivities – as in Cambodia.

In the Thailand case study, the NGO had for over a decade worked to improve the livelihoods of Karen migrant communities with tangible results, notably the initiation of the saving groups. However, they came to realize that local identities and cultural activities are an integral part of wellbeing and of primary importance to their beneficiaries. This understanding had to be integrated into future development efforts. As things stood, local Karen people who ran savings groups did not see themselves as leaders: rather, leaders were identified as outside Thai people in power. For any sense of leadership to be embodied, interventions would have to start with recognising Karen identity and culture as a central asset to be maintained as this is a source of pride as manifest in their own languages, arts, know-how, and rituals. At the same time this cultural identity was threatened through integration into the mainstream society. Without recognizing this struggle, development initiatives fail to live up to their full potential in advancing local wellbeing. Ai helped to expose the NGO to these priorities, which were not invited to be voiced or noticed previously. Perhaps, cultural priorities did not fit into the NGOs developmental agendas, but the Ai research data made it harder to ignore, obligating the NGO staff to respond. The NGO consequently expanded the scope of its work by supporting the transmission of cultural know-how from the elder generation to the young.

As an outsider, one might not achieve a deep understanding without testing concrete ideas, because communities must make decisions that affect their realities, not speculative ones in

workshops. One important design principle in social innovation is to "amplify" hidden, grass-root efforts through design (Manzini 2009), however, this must be accompanied by interrogating what design can inadvertently prioritise, such as productivity and efficiency, due to its industrial linage. In contrast, the everyday practice of "beef sticks" could be argued as evidence of "systems" designing that is just as creative. We must recognise these as equally valid, heterogeneous design practices that have been ongoing under other names (Akama & Yee 2019; Calderón Salazar & Guitérrez Borrero, 2017), in contrast to the western-centricity of design processes where "creativity" tends to value originality or novelty of ideas (Kim et al., 2012).

In some instances, Participatory Design seeks solutions to specific problems. However, self-determination might mean equipping locals with action research tools that they decide they might use or not, completely independently of outsiders and their intentions. In the Cambodia example, redirecting the use of bamboo for different things was raised numerous times in meetings. Locals loved the idea of making furniture as a means of improving their income. However, when the time came to actualising the idea, it was met with concerns, subsequently, revealing the risk to vital safety nets that were not made explicit in the earlier discussions. The realisation of their significance allowed such social fabrics to be identified, yet these complexities and their understandings cannot manifest upon request, as they are more likely to emerge unexpectedly in ongoing, contingent encounters (Akama & Light 2018). This underscores the importance of constant reflexivity at all stages of participatory work.

In a place still living with traumas of collectivization under the Khmer Rouge, an activity that is deeply embedded in social relations has allowed households to rebuild a way of living side by side while affording a critical welfare safety net. This significance should be recognised. ABCD and Ai strength-based approaches can help to valorise success and clarify local priorities, if they are combined with sufficient time and space for reflection among participants and within their communities. This allows for the discovery of things done well and wider concerns and interests, sometimes inadvertently, to confirm as a matter of importance.

Conclusion

The chapter shows how strength-based approaches can bring more attention to how and why disruptive innovations are accepted or resisted, how to foster meaningful participation in a local context, and what is unique about local communities. Adopting a place-based approach to social innovation and design, this chapter shows that western-centric notions of

equitable participation and creative originality are questionable. Instead of assumptions about people's capacity or desire to take part equally, strength-based approaches help us to understand the impact of hierarchies on participatory design approaches, which has implications for the way locals view their participation in design initiatives. The case study in Thailand shows, for instance, that when locals feel reluctant to express what is their highest priority, such as having their cultural identity taken seriously, Ai can help to make priorities clearer, set agendas accordingly, and potentially deepen local people's sense of leadership. The uniqueness of the Karen identity has turned out to be the basis for more deep and meaningful participation, where aspirations are articulated in a more dialogical fashion. This can work in complement to other participatory programs, such as instigating savings groups.

The case study in Cambodia suggests how action research in conjunction with reflection can sharpen vigilance in design approaches. Self-determination can be supported by ensuring sufficient time and space for authentic deliberations as part of the intervention itself, which also includes supporting discussions without the designers being present. As this chapter has shown, fostering unobtrusive situations can allow opportunities presented by design be digested, concerns be meaningfully articulated, and proposals then be adopted or rejected. Moreover, with time and space for such deliberation, a strength-based design process can lead community members to reinterpret and revalue prosaic community life, which can be argued as far more valuable than putting the primary emphasis on novel innovations as solutions to complex social issues.

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