



Rethinking Weberian Bureaucracy A Case Study of the Decentralization and Deconcentration Reform in Cambodia

Kaiwen Shen^(✉)

Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, China
kevinshen@bfsu.edu.cn

Abstract. The petrification of bureaucracy, according to Max Weber, is a gradual realization of rationalization through which people become capable of mastering all kinds of information through more precise and effective computation. Though Weberian bureaucracy is an ideal type, it is undeniable that it can never be ideal in practice. In fact, bureaucracy is not always equivalent to efficiency. Despite the fact that many previous scholars have acknowledged in full accord that Weberian bureaucracy is not an exhaustive depiction of real bureaucratic dynamics, they scarcely examine it in practical contexts. As a country that has undergone wars, post-conflict societal ecology, and authoritarian administration, Cambodia launched the decentralization and deconcentration reform in 2002, exhibiting fast-changing and diverse bureaucratic characteristics. Hence, this paper centers on the dimension of local governments and central-local relationships within the D&D reform, attempting to reflect on the Weberian hypothesis that bureaucracy is the pinnacle of efficiency in terms of actuality.

Keywords: Weberian Bureaucracy · Decentralization · Deconcentration · Cambodia

1 Introduction

Bureaucracy to Weber is not a type of regime, but a system of efficiency-oriented administration that is driven by instrumental rationality, an ideological incentive leading people to pursue maximum efficiency. In fact, Weber does not give a straightforward definition of bureaucracy. This is probably because he conceptualizes bureaucracy as an ideal type, meaning that it is an idealistic conception of an efficient system with the highest perfection rather than a material object. As Martin Albrow contends, Weber frequently puts the term “bureaucracy” in brackets in his work, which indicates that the word is derived from everyday language rather than from scientific terminologies or jargon [1]. Although there is not a straight definition of bureaucracy, the notion itself is not ambiguous. The concept of bureaucracy is clarified in the Weberian analysis of organization. According to him, a society incorporates a variety of organizations, such as states, parties,

guilds, federations, offices, etc. Throughout these organizational praxes, administrators and policy-makers try to maximize the calculability and efficiency of the system by using computation and reckonings, setting up standardized processes, procedures and requirements, establishing a meticulous division of labor in line with hierarchies. Weberian model of organizational efficiency assumes that all aspects of the individual personality, which are not relevant to the strict performance of his or her duties, will be cast off as they enter the organization, or suppressed through effective socialization. If this were so, then a complete account of an organization could be given by providing a formal definition of duties of each office, and of the relation between them; efficiency, in turn, would be a matter of securing a rational division of tasks at every level [2].

Hence, bureaucracy is endowed with the propensity to impersonalize and instrumentalize individuals within the system and subsequently convert them into cogs in a machine on a mechanistic basis. To conclude, distinguished by its rigid division of labor, regulations, intricate procedures, impersonal relationships, and hierarchical authority, bureaucracy, as Weber alleges, becomes “the ultimate means of power for those who dominate the bureaucratic apparatus” and the most effective way of administration [3].

However, many scholars dissent from the Weberian view that bureaucracy is the most efficient system, and consider it inconsistent with reality. Most studies prior to Weber have accentuated the inefficiency of bureaucracy, and it is even sometimes used as a synonym for sloppiness and inefficiency. His rational model of bureaucracy was critiqued by John Keane as a proposition that does not pose as an exhaustive description of the dynamics of the bureaucratization process. It does not claim to depict or reproduce conceptually the “really real” content and form of modern bureaucratic reality [4]. It is worth pointing out that the coordination between subordinate bureaucratic organizations is less of a consistent rule-based approach but more of a tug-of-war or quarrels for power. These inconsistencies may dismantle bureaucracy from within. For instance, the effective operation of a bureaucracy requires delegation of authority, which in reality often leads to separatism and divergent interests between the subordinates. This often results in a disequilibrium between subordinates and their superiors because subordinate organizations may set sub-goals that conflict with the collective objectives in order to usurp more interests for themselves, giving rise to departmentalism and internal dysfunctions of the bureaucratic apparatus [5]. Besides, David Beetham thinks Weber’s assumption that the bureaucratization process eliminates people’s individuality and agency is heavily flawed. On the contrary, he offers a view that the manner of individuals’ social interaction at work can be crucial to the effectiveness of their performance, and any authority, which ignores these factors or tries to suppress them, is likely to meet with resistance [2]. Indeed, if bureaucracy eradicates free wills, nepotism, simple favoritism, and corruption, the prevalent maladies of the current bureaucratic organizations will no longer exist because these problems are exactly generated by unlawful expectations and behaviors guided by immoral personal will. In addition, as an administrative tool, bureaucracy is at the disposal of political elites, the people in power, which means the system may be legitimate but is inherently monopolistic. The monopoly of bureaucracy excludes competition, which leads to few incentives to improve efficiency, resulting in stagnancy,

incapacity, and low-quality public goods or services. Although there were numerous theoretical dissensions on Weberian bureaucracy in the academia, few scholars scrutinize it based on empirical evidences.

Cambodia began to enact decentralization reforms in 1996, but the reforms at that time were limited to the central government and did not extend to the local level. It was not until 2002 that the Cambodian government decided to delegate power to local governments (communes and sangkats), and Cambodia commenced its exploration of communal decentralization. Decentralization, as it is supposed to be, can dispense with intermediaries, bring the people closer to the government, and eventually contribute to the increase in efficiency. The reform was neither a failure nor a success because while it did contribute to lowering the institutional costs and shortening the gap between people and the government, it encountered many problems e.g. nepotism, information monopoly etc. In general, the reform acts as a mirror that reflects some real dynamics of bureaucracy. Therefore, this paper focuses on the emerging problems during the development of the D&D reform in Cambodia in order to explore the dynamics of bureaucracy in a real context by reflecting on the inadequacies of Weberian bureaucracy.

2 The Decentralization and Deconcentration Reform

2.1 Historical Context

For Cambodia, democracy can be rarely observed in its long and profound history. As a country that has undergone centuries of monarchic regimes, French colonization, communist revolution (Khmer Rouge), Vietnamese occupation, and the current Cambodian People's Party (CPP) administration, its citizens have long been exposed to authoritarianism. After the collapse of the Khmer Rouge, seamless wars plunged the country into chaos in which society was shattered, rules were violated, and education and production were suspended. Under such kind of circumstances, in 1989, after the withdrawal of Vietnam, Cambodia finally had a relevantly stable condition for development. In February 1992, the establishment of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was authorized by the Security Council in order to boost normalization in Cambodia. UNTAC was officially deployed on 15 March 1992 to assume control of key sectors of the country's administrative structures to ensure a condition that was suitable for the coming election one year later [6]. After the national election in 1993, a coalition government was co-founded by the United National Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) and Cambodian People's Party (CPP). At that time, dividing and defending the spoils rather than the pursuit of good governance of office were the preoccupations of the political elites from the two parties [7]. Therefore, afraid of being overwhelmed by their counterparts, both parties adopted a rather centralized approach of governance that rejected decentralization or devolution. The ever-escalating tension between FUNCINPEC and CPP eventually resulted in a coup in 1997 by CPP under the leadership of Hun Sen, who became the prime minister in the 1998 election and retained the position until now. Since then, CPP concentrated the power of FUNCINPEC and became authoritarian and supreme.

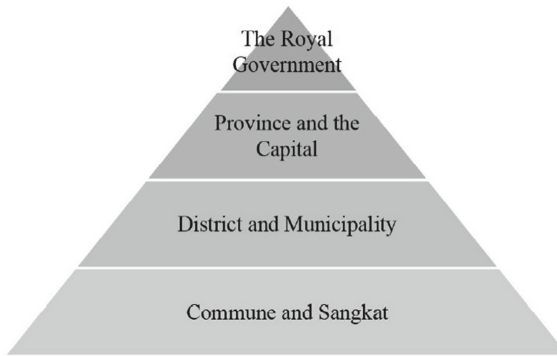


Fig. 1. The Vertical Management of Cambodia

Since the mid-1990s, some international donors rolled in, which brought forth opportunities for the CPP government to rethink its administration methods. The D&D reform was officially initiated in 2001, with the introduction of the decentralization and deconcentration (D&D) strategy and the enactment of Decentralization Law and Law on Administrative Management of Communes and Sangkats, which focused on improving the autonomy of communes and the efficiency of local administration. The sudden shift for decentralization may seem weird, but it was not gratuitous. In line with Peter Blunt and Mark Turner, there are three major factors leading to the reform: (1) the donor-funded SEIL, a program that helped strengthen local governance; (2) the expectations for better governance from citizens and donors encouraged the government to establish the multi-donor Partnership for Local Governance (PLG); (3) CPP sought to extend its control to local areas by influencing the communes [7]. What is undeniable is that, for CPP, there is also a chance to obtain manipulation of communes and exert strong, tangible influences on local governance.

2.2 Laws, Legislation and Empowerment of Communes

According to the Constitution [8], the subnational administration of Cambodia is categorized into three hierarchical tiers, which include: a. Tier 1. Capital/province; b. Tier 2. Districts (Khan) and municipality; c. Tier 3. Commune (Khum) and Sangkat (the subdivision of Khan).

Currently, there are 24 provinces (excluding the capital city), 204 districts (including the district, municipality, and khan), 1406 communes, and 246 sangkats [9]. The Constitution suggests the vertical development matrix of Cambodia, which helps understand how each component actually functions. Besides, the number of tier 3 (communes and sangkats) institutions are increasing steadily since the initiation of decentralization and deconcentration reform, suggesting the fact that local decentralization continues to be refined (Fig. 1).

The other two laws can be generally interpreted in the following three dimensions:

- (1) Institutional and Personnel Settings. Each commune/sangkat incorporates a commune/sangkat council that serves Cambodian civilians based on localities. The council is comprised of a president, who is also a commune/sangkat chief, and a few deputies and members [10].
- (2) Powers. The council is the legislative body while a commune/sangkat chief plays an executive role. Included in the main responsibilities of the commune/sangkat council are to decide and approve budget plans, community development plans, and public security and order in their own locality by decisions [10].
- (3) Election. Communal elections apply a proportional electoral system. A president of the council, also a commune/sangkat chief, is a candidate from a political party that wins a majority of the council seats, and is at the top of the party's candidate list [11].

3 Bureaucratic Dynamics Revealed in the D&D Reform

3.1 The Impact of Internal Elements

3.1.1 Relationship: Eclipsed, not Impersonalized

Corruption has long been a malady in the majority of the bureaucratic systems, especially in those which are notably authoritarian e.g. Cambodian bureaucracy. However, even after the D&D reform, corruption was still rampant. Cambodia was brought into the evaluation of Transparency International in 2005, 4 years after the D&D reform. However, with a Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) scoring at 2.3 [12], Cambodia was observed as one of the most corrupt countries in the world [13]. Table 1 manifests that the CPI of Cambodia almost leveled off until now. Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that the reform induced the permeation of corruption from the central government to local communes. Furthermore, some studies suggest that most current commune leaders in Cambodia assumed power in the 1980s, which means their relatives and others around them may gradually enter the power hierarchy due to their "care" and "attention" [14]. The nepotism hindered the distribution of power and the development of democracy in communes, posing a negative influence on the structure and the efficiency of the local bureaucratic system.

Some may argue that this is probably due to the lack of corresponding supervision systems and regulatory frameworks, so in the end, bureaucracy still imposes instrumental rationality on individuals, annihilating their morality and individuality. However, in 1999 and 2006, the Royal Government had already issued a Sub-decree on the establishment of Anti-corruption Unit in order to combat corruption based on three pivotal facets: education, prevention and prohibition [15]. Moreover, Anti-Corruption Law (ACL) was promulgated on April 17, 2010 and its amendment on August 1, 2011. This rigorous law was enacted with the purpose to promote effectiveness of all forms of service, strengthen good governance and rule of law in leadership and governance as well as to

Table 1. The CPI of Cambodia

Year	CPI	Ranking of Cambodia/Number of Countries Surveyed
2005	2.3	130/159
2006	2.1	151/163
2007	2	162/180
2008	1.8	166/180
2009	2	158/180
2010	2.1	154/178
2011	2.1	164/183
2012	22	157/176
2013	20	160/177
2014	21	156/175
2015	21	150/168
2016	21	156/176
2017	21	161/180
2018	20	161/180
2019	20	162/180
2020	21	160/180
2021	23	157/180

Source Compiled by author. Data retrieved from Transparency International *Notice* Transparency International's evaluation system was converted from a ten-point scale to a percentage scale in 2012.

maintain integrity and justice, which is fundamental for social development. Acted both institutionally and legislatively, the bureaucratic system of Cambodia could still hardly get rid of corruption. On the contrary, those regulations seem futile to the containment of corruption in the country (see Table 1).

In short, Weber's theory seems insufficient to interpret the status quo of Cambodia because he wrongly posits bureaucratization as a process that eliminates individuality and thus impersonalizes interpersonal nexus. However, the indisputable fact is that corruption and nepotism are both driven by people's internal demands in pursuit of career advancement as well as material success, and are achieved based on personal relationships. Such demands are amplified to some extent by bureaucracy, which fosters the need for promotion through its hierarchical structure. In a government bureaucracy, bribery and nepotism are often speedier techniques for bureaucrats to acquire their superiors' favor while also avoiding intense competition. Potential bribers and bribees tend to evaluate whether the bribery (corruption) gain is greater than the penalty multiplied by the likelihood of being caught and prosecuted [16]. If the gains exceed potential losses,

bribery/corruption takes place. Correspondingly, superiors not only seek promotion to higher positions but also try to forge a coalition that is comprised of trusted followers in order to protect themselves, resulting in the emergence of nepotism. Chhit Sokhon, the governor of Preah Sihanouk, was prosecuted for appointing his son, Chhit Rattanak to the deputy administrative director of provincial hall, and a friend to deputy governor of Prey Nob. Besides, Mith Karen, a National Assembly official, was charged for appointing more than 20 members of his family to work for the parliament, while also being charged of corruption [17].

In the meantime, regulations and institutional supervision endow the power of monopoly to the bureaucrats who are in charge of authorization and supervision. Therefore, the more regulations there are, the higher the frequency of interactions with members in private sphere will be, and thus, the higher the probability that a member will engage in corrupt practices [18]. To some extent, the election system of commune councils in Cambodia further magnifies the problem.

The upsurge of corruption and nepotism illustrates a reverse trend to rationalization since both corruption and nepotism are detrimental to collective efficiency of the entire bureaucratic system. Nepotism promotes partiality and departmentalism, which means superiors are more inclined to recruit or promote people in terms of their social capital instead of genuine capacity and merit. In fact, such favoritism undermines employees' morale, resulting in inefficiency of employers. Besides, the corruption often involves "rent-seeking", meaning an effort to increase one's share of wealth without producing wealth. The "rent-seeking" is achieved by monopolizing social ties and personal networks, which eventually leads to declined economic and administrative efficiency through misallocation of resources, reduced wealth creation, lost government revenue, heightened income inequality [19].

In general, bureaucratic hierarchy generates self-interested motives and an even stronger desire for promotion as people are naturally endowed with the longing for success and self-dignity. It is notable that even in several countries where people committing corruption may be penalized by capital punishment, corruption is still prevalent. Such a phenomenon illustrates a fact that it is entirely possible for individuals to act in a value-justified or self-interested manner, following the guidance of precepts or requirements without regard to the consequences of their actions. Therefore, there is a need to combine the standpoint of the actor and the institutional factors when examining bureaucracy, instead of arbitrarily asserting that relationships under the framework of bureaucracy are entirely impersonal. It oversimplifies the real situation.

3.1.2 Efficiency: Fragmented, not Integrated

Internal disputes and divergences between different interest groups may never vanish as long as bureaucracy is practised as a model for administration. Even in an authoritarian regime, bureaucracy is comprised of different stakeholders (see Table 2), thus it is not invariably efficient. According to the Law on Administrative Management of Communes and Sangkats, the election of commune councilors in Cambodia adopts proportional representation. What is interesting about the electoral system is that the candidates for

Table 2. Results of Local Elections in Cambodia

Winner Parties	Years		
	2002	2007	2012
Cambodian People's Party (CPP)	60.89%	60.82%	61.67%
Sam Rainsy Party (SRP)	16.94%	25.19%	20.63%
Human Right Party (HRP)	N/A	N/A	9.95%
FUNCINPEC	21.97%	5.36%	3.93%
Norodom Ranariddh	N/A	8.11%	3.09%
Others	0.21%	0.52%	0.73%

Source compiled by author. Data retrieved from: the National Election Committee (NEC) [20]

a position in commune councils are nominated by political parties and are appointed in terms of the number of votes each party receives, starting from the top of the party's candidate list. For example, the chief councilor is usually the candidate at the top of the list and belongs to the party that receives the majority of the votes. Henceforth, voters are literally voting for parties, instead of individuals. Besides, in terms of the system, commune councilors who lose their positions in political parties correspondingly lose their positions in commune councils. In this case, candidates are more inclined to represent interests of their respective political parties, instead of their voters. Therefore, political parties exert strong influences on members of commune councils. In the event of a political conflict, there is always a risk that members of commune councils may lose their neutrality. They are more likely to spend time contemplating how to grip their position in their respective parties instead of providing substantive public services. In fact, Table 2 shows that the majority of commune councilors and commune chiefs are members of CPP, the ruling party in Cambodia. This reflects that the development of commune councils in the D&D reform is a political approach for CPP to extend its influence and control to the local level.

Though the D&D reform is an attempt of CPP to grab the grassroots, evidence has shown that it is inadequate [6]. Pragmatic power is absent in commune councils because apart from those "less-pragmatic" functions such as civil registration, many of the powers authorized by law are not implemented. The discrepancy between theoretical power and actual power results from the conflicts and quarrels between the political elites in the central government. Moreover, such a discrepancy has led to two major problems at the local level. Horizontally, even though CPP has gained predominance, its oppositions (e.g. SRP) which advocate a more pragmatic devolution are not totally excluded from the regime, which may result in a tug-of-war between different interests groups in both communes and superior government spheres. Vertically, the Royal Government always tries to penetrate its administrative power to the communes to grip control over the grassroots, but it usually induces resistance from the communal governments and local

civilians, resulting in the divergences between state will and communal autonomy, which also lowers administrative efficiency.

3.1.3 Information Monopoly: Lacking Transparency

For communes in Cambodia, the closeness of decision-making process hinders most people from actual participation. The closeness of Cambodian communes can be mainly manifested in the following three aspects: First, the decision-making power is centralized. The decision-making power of the commune councils is mainly held by the chief commune councilor, which is almost impossible for ordinary people or even other members of the commune to share it. Secondly, the objective of decision-making is self-interested or party-interest oriented. A large proportion of the decisions made by the commune councils are aimed at safeguarding the interests of the party, which may deviate from the actual demands from civilians - to increase welfare and provide quality public services. Thirdly, the decision-making process is usually inaccessible to the public. It is generally conducted in secret by a few members under the leadership of the commune chiefs. For instance, Heng Sochhada, the second deputy commune chief of Prek Pra commune was excluded from key decision-making meetings by the commune chief who was a member of CPP only because Sochhada was a member of SRP [21]. Such a decision-making process dominated by political elites may appear effective in the beginning, but in the long term, it gradually separates the commune councils from people and mystifies the decision-making process, destructing the commune-civilian trust. Less interaction and engagement discourage people from participating in political discussions and lead to information asymmetry, which makes people hardly understand the reasons behind communal conduct, causing unintended conflicts.

Task specialization is one of the key premises of Weberian bureaucracy, which means that jobs and errands are meticulously split for certain employees to complete. This is correct in theory because large-scale administration necessitates a precise and nuanced division of work for efficiency's sake. However, as previously said, bureaucracy is fractured by competing interests, and as a result, it is continuously attempting to mystify itself by monopolizing or misrepresenting information that is of genuine importance to specific groups of individuals. As a result, information asymmetry always generates a gap between the activities that individuals are expected to tackle and the tasks that people are really dealing with, regardless of how specific the division of labor is. Furthermore, bureaucrats who are oblivious of real-world conditions may be tempted to go beyond their tasks and take on their colleagues' errands.

3.2 The Impact of External Milieux: An Externality-Driven Reform

Project SEILA was initiated by Swedish International Cooperative Agency (Sida) and some other international donors in 1996. The project introduced a suite of institutional reforms for communes and sangkats in order to enforce local governance and conduct capacity building among the locals in more than 2000 villages [22]. In line with SEILA, the Cambodian Rehabilitation and Regeneration (CARERE) project was founded by

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1997, to empower governmental institutions and individuals at local level (including tier 2 and tier 3). Besides, Local Development Funds (LDF) and Local Planning Process (LPP) were auxiliary affiliations to CARERE. While LDF provided the local governments with financial support, LPP was responsible for the reallocation of the money supported by LDF. CARERE and project SEILA both coordinated their activities with a number of provincial ministries and with the Commune and Village Development Committees. Their efforts paid off; based on the Report of the Joint Evaluation Mission, until March 2000, communes had become more self-reliant [22]. Most importantly, locals' confidence in communes and sangkats has been significantly restored. With the ideas of democracy and good governance being spread as CARERE and SEILA advanced, there were increasing demands for better governance among local citizens [23]. The campaign resulted in the introduction of the 2002 election of local council members in Cambodia, which marked a concrete step towards devolution from the central government to local governments. As Dosch puts it, the predominant impetus for the D&D reform came not from within the country, but from international donors, which were the first to promote decentralization in the communal dimension [24].

As it has been demonstrated in the figure in appendix, SEILA programme bears resemblance to "external cardiac pacemaker" which constantly provides a wide variety of supports to Cambodian communes. This approach somehow refines the local bureaucratic systems, providing brand new versions of administration and bureaucracy. To that extent, Weber is right because the essence of the reform is an evolution of bureaucracy and thus a process of rationalization. However, Weberian bureaucracy was remorselessly hierarchical and concentrated. Technically, with power concentrated at the top, decentralization reform may never be an open option. What should be underlined here is that although previous analyses suggest that the reform is a tool for CPP to extend its influence from the central to the local, there are indeed many other ways for CPP to grip local control (e.g. a more authoritarian vertical management and propaganda). The direct reasons for the D&D reform are the influence of international donors and the people's appeals for good governance. Nevertheless, as mentioned previously, due to systematic reasons and the need for stability, Cambodia never substantially devolved the central power to the local governmental bodies until international donors rolled into its territory.

Although it still remains unclear whether the efficiency of the local governments has improved or not after the D&D reform as there is little devolution of decision-making, it is necessary to accentuate the fact that in the context of globalization, as the scope and depth of international impact a single bureaucracy are increasing, external elements exerting influences on bureaucracy cannot be neglected. With strengthened external influences, it is almost impossible for a bureaucratic system to be completely insulated, irrespective of how authoritarian it is, like that in Cambodia. The story illustrates a point that rationalization can also be generated and led by external forces.

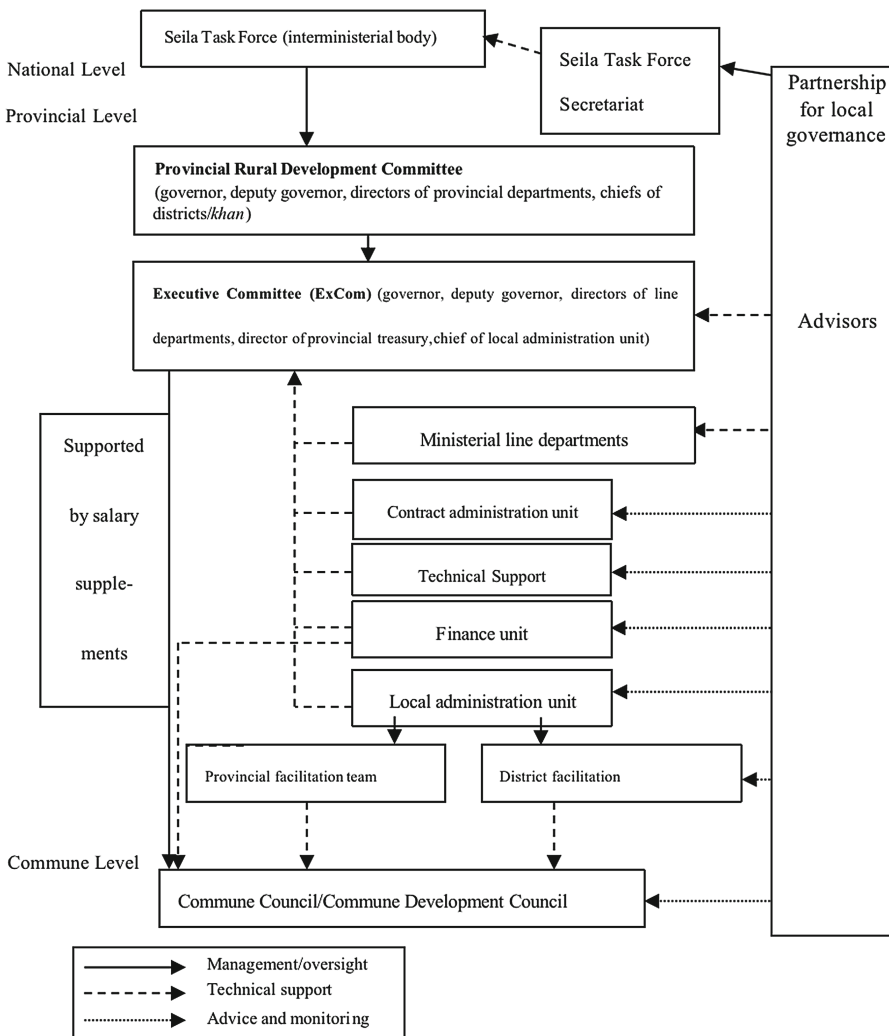
4 Conclusion

Weber's rational model is an exquisite ideal type for examining the development of bureaucracy. However, such an ideal type is increasingly being challenged by the traits being demonstrated during bureaucratic praxes, and so the basic assumptions of Weber need to be revised and refined in the real context.

In Cambodia, a country with rampant corruption and nepotism, institutional means and regulatory frameworks seem of no avail at all. Weber's ideal-type hypothesis ruthlessly views humans as fully rational creatures, with the ability to find all alternatives to achieve a goal and to measure the optimal choice by projecting the consequences of its implementation. In practice though, people are faced with an uncertain and complex environment, where information is not complete, distorted, or even monopolized and human computational and cognitive abilities are biologically limited. Based on previous examples and data, the empowerment of communes in the D&D reform is simply not a realization of rationalization or the betterment of efficiency. It is in practice a political approach for CPP to extend its influence to local regions in order to grip control of more Cambodian civilians and consolidate its authoritarianism, while there are also impediments coming from CPP's oppositions and local citizens. Disputes between different stakeholders splinter the system into pieces, making the reform of little significance.

Given that the D&D reform is triggered by international donors and NGOs, the dynamics of bureaucracy in the context of globalization can be strongly influenced by exogenous factors. As a multi-role, multi-layered phenomenon, the impact of globalization is phenomenally pervasive in different domains, including the bureaucratic systems around the globe. Moreover, to adapt to economic globalization, countries struggle to improve their quality of public services and create favorable external conditions for economic development. The wave of economic globalization has had a significant impact on the world's bureaucratic systems and government functions. In general, economic globalization not only triggers a massive flow of goods, services, products, and information across national borders but also changes the basis and mode of the international division of labor, meaning that countries need to rethink their roles and make corresponding changes to their development strategies and bureaucratic systems. Thus, in the context of globalization, the nature of the development of bureaucracy is indeed a global-internal interplay that should be examined comprehensively by analyzing both inner and outer elements.

Appendix



Institutional Structure of SEILA Programme (Source Rudengren and Ojendal [25])

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