Connecting national ownership and local participation in aid recipient countries

The cases of Rwanda and Cambodia

Malin Hasselskog,[1] Vedaste Ndizera,[2] and Joakim Öjendal[3]

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Abstract: This paper examines previously under-explored links between two aid-nurtured ideals. 'National ownership' and 'local participation' both aim to increase recipient influence and thereby address the inherent inequality of the aid relation. Questioning the common assumption of synergy, we analyse the nature and role of local participation in situations of national ownership, asking how prevailing forms of national ownership play out on a local level and what current experiences there are of local participation. The examination is designed as a qualitative case study of two strategically selected aid recipient countries. Rwanda and Cambodia display different patterns of national ownership and different ways of accommodating the ideal of local participation. Interviews with representatives of civil society organisations point to far-reaching adjustment to government agendas and highly limited forms of local participation, and we conclude that national ownership is not per se conducive to local participation, which may rather play highly disparate roles in nationally owned development.

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[1] School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, Sweden; corresponding author: malin.hasselskog@globalstudies.gu.se; [2] Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Rwanda, Huye; [3] School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

1   Introduction

An enduring concern in international development co-operation[1] is the inherent inequality between those who receive and those who provide resources (Eyben 2006). Therefore, over the years there has been a recurrent ambition to increase recipient agency, initiative, and influence, which has resulted in the continuous design of new mechanisms and emergence of new buzzwords (Cornwall and Eade 2010).

Among the most prominent of these mechanisms and buzzwords are 'local participation' and 'national ownership' (Hasselskog 2020). Though the reasoning behind national ownership is older, it was with the Paris Declaration in 2005 that it gained prominence and high-level recognition and for a while came to constitute the core of the aid effectiveness agenda (OECD DAC 2005/2008). Based on the stated ambition of shifting power from those who provide to those who receive aid, the assumption remains that development priorities and strategies should be domestically determined rather than shaped by external agendas (Harper-Shipman 2020; Hasselskog 2022). Local participation, meanwhile, which has been promoted since at least the 1960s, was rapidly adopted by the mainstream in the 1990s and has since then been part of virtually any aid-funded endeavour. In the course of a decade, according to Mansuri and Rao (2013: 15), the World Bank alone allocated almost US$85 billion to local participatory development, and continued funding reflects a sustained belief that people should influence decisions that concern them rather than being exposed to externally determined interventions (Cornwall 2011; Hasselskog 2016; Hickey and Kothari 2009).

These kinds of ambitious and appealing ideals are easy to agree on and, as Carothers (2015) discusses, have come to constitute an intrinsic part of development thinking and practice. Employing the ideals, however, is more difficult. Extensive scholarly analysis points to fundamental shortcomings in the operation of local participation as well as national ownership, including excessive focus on technical design, with ensuing depoliticization (Ferguson 1994; Hasselskog et al. 2017; Holvoet and Rombouts 2008; Hout and Robinson 2009; Leal 2010), and on efficiency with a tendency that responsibility is transferred to recipients but not corresponding control (Arnstein 1969; Cornwall 2011; Harper-Shipman 2020; Hasselskog 2016; Hasselskog and Schierenbeck 2017; Whitfield 2009). Throughout—and in contrast to the ambition of increased recipient agency and influence—much research shows that provider influence tends to remain strong.

Simultaneously, overall national ownership among aid recipient countries does increase. According to large-scale monitoring linked to the aid effectiveness agenda, soon after the Paris Declaration there was significant progress. Though the rate of progress has since then gradually levelled off and is highly mixed between countries, overall levels of national ownership have continued to rise (OECD 2007: 16f, 2008a: 29ff, 2008b: 33ff, 2012; OECD/UNDP 2014: 24, 2016: 21, 30ff, 59ff, 2019: 39). Meanwhile, aid recipient countries' policy independence is increasing also for other reasons than the ownership agenda. The importance of 'traditional' development aid is diminishing on a global level as well as in numerous recipient countries. Other financial flows and sources of revenue are increasingly available, as are other providers of aid (e.g. Rosser 2020), allowing

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[1] In the paper, 'development co-operation' and 'aid' are used interchangeably, denoting official development assistance (ODA) as defined by OECD (2022).

recipient countries more room to determine priorities and strategies and set the development agenda domestically.

Irrespective of whether national ownership increases due to an appealing ideal nurtured by the aid community or due to other factors, little is known about the possible implications for local participation. While national ownership and local participation tend to be treated as conceptual siblings, talked about as a pair as if emerging conjointly, and while, as noted, each has been extensively analysed, they are not only promoted by different activities but also considered in separate bodies of research. Their interrelation has thus not been closely interrogated, and the apparent assumption that national ownership and local participation go hand in hand may be a misconstruction (Hasselskog 2020; cf. Lie 2019: 1108ff). That development priorities and strategies are domestically determined, as prescribed by national ownership, does not necessarily mean that people influence decisions that concern them, in line with local participation. Rather, as depicted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), ownership implies strong government leadership (Booth 2012; OECD 2003: 10f; OECD DAC 2005/2008: 15; OECD/UNDP 2016, 2019); as scholarly analysed, it denotes state capacity, commitment, and assertiveness; and according to empirical research, it often coincides with central state control (Hasselskog 2020; Rocha Menocal and Mulley 2006; Whitfield 2009). There are thus indications that national ownership tends to come with centralized policy- and decision-making, which in itself is in tension with local participation. Also, that development policies are determined domestically will have implications for development actors and activities on a local level, and domestic policy-makers' approach to local participation will be crucial for what forms of local participation are possible and what role it will have in the nationally owned development model.

Therefore, we argue, the relation between national ownership and local participation cannot be assumed but needs to be empirically investigated. This paper sets out to do so, analysing the nature and role of local participation in situations of strong national ownership, by asking how prevailing forms of national ownership play out on a local level and what current experiences there are of local participation.

2   Research design and methods

The examination is designed as a qualitative study of two strategically selected cases of aid recipient countries (Bryman 2014; Yin 2009). Rwanda and Cambodia were selected due to their similarities in a number of relevant dimensions. In the mid-1990s, the two countries were, after complete societal collapse caused by conflict and genocide, in dire need of reconstruction. Failure by the international community to effectively intervene, and the ensuing bad conscience, contributed to the massive inflow of international aid that followed and which—as the countries strove to reconstruct and reconcile their societies—gradually moved from quick impact emergency assistance to longer-term development co-operation. The two countries have thus for almost three decades been exposed to a variety of aid providers with partly disparate agendas and approaches and to continuously shifting aid trends (Ear 2013; Hayman 2009), including those of local participation and national ownership.

Rwanda and Cambodia are also both societies with long-term experience of authoritarian top-down approaches, historically characterized by steep power hierarchies, patron–client relations, cultures of 'obedience', and the ensuing absence of political participation (Chandler 1983; Newbury 1978; Uvin 1998; cf. Öjendal and Kim 2006). Over the past decades of aid inflow, then, a large and varied range of development-related activities have been implemented, in which people's active involvement has been required (Blunt and Turner 2005; Chemouni 2014;

Hasselskog 2016; Plummer and Tritt 2010). In both countries, local participation has been promoted not least through comprehensive decentralization reform, specific participatory programmes, and support to civil society.

Meanwhile, Rwanda and Cambodia were early, eager, and successful adopters of the ownership agenda, displaying rising levels in official monitoring, though with Rwanda well ahead of Cambodia. In the 2010 OECD survey, Rwanda was one out of two countries receiving the top score on the ownership indicator, which was an improvement from score 'B' in 2005 and 2007. Cambodia, meanwhile, reached a score of 'B', which was an improvement from 'C' in the two previous surveys (OECD 2012). In the 2013 and 2016 monitoring rounds, using new indicators, both countries displayed mixed results, though with progress on at least some indicators (GPEDC 2016a, b; Hasselskog 2020).

From being highly aid dependent in the mid-1990s, and deeply ingrained with ideals nurtured by traditional aid, Rwanda and Cambodia have thus moved towards stronger policy independence. While there is no doubt that national ownership has increased, it is unclear how local participation has fared under this process, which is what we set out to investigate. For this investigation, Rwanda and Cambodia constitute critical cases. Sharing some key characteristics and similarities in their trajectories, while also displaying different and changing patterns of national ownership and different ways of accommodating the ideal of local participation, they will provide illustrative findings on the nature and role of local participation in situations of strong national ownership. The two countries are obviously not 'representative' of aid recipient countries at large, and we are not seeking to unveil any strict causation. However, a study of them will offer varied indications of the possible implications of different forms of national ownership for different forms of local participation, and it is our ambition that the results will suggest wider patterns that can be assessed further in relation to other cases.

In each country, we trace the evolution of national ownership and the approach to local participation. Based on national development plans and other policy documents, along with donor documentation and previous research, we identify and analyse expressions of the governments' stance and relations with aid providers, and of explicit ambitions of local participation. For the empirical investigation, the context in both countries is one of government-led decentralization and civil society activities with participatory ambitions. The original empirical material consists of over 50 interviews with representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs) conducting development-related activities in local communities, and beneficiaries and local officials who are affected by these activities. In order to find out how prevailing forms of national ownership play out among the CSOs and what experiences there are of local participation, the interviews focused on CSO relations with the government at national and local levels and with international funders, and on current attitudes to the active involvement of beneficiaries as well as obstacles to and instances of such influence. In Rwanda, during June–August 2022, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 representatives of seven CSOs, five local leaders, and 18 beneficiaries. In Cambodia, during January–August 2022, 20 interviews were conducted with representatives of three CSOs. The interviews were conducted in Kinyarwanda and Khmer respectively, though in a few cases partly in English depending on the preference of the interviewee. Most interviews were recorded, pending the stated consent of the interviewee, and transcribed, and all were translated into English.

Through qualitative content analysis of the interview material, we analyse prevailing forms of national ownership and predominant experiences of local participation. As in most qualitative case studies (Yin 2009), the two country cases are rich and diverse and deserve to be presented in their own right, and the nature and role of local participation in each country is therefore first discussed separately. However, the cases are also similar enough to be contrasted and compared and used

for a discussion of wider patterns of implications for different forms of local participation in different situations of national ownership.

3   Rwanda

After the 1994 genocide, the development scene in Rwanda was one of political, societal, and economic collapse and an urgent need for complete reconstruction. Due to the international community's failure to effectively intervene to stop the genocide, there was also a sense of guilt. International development aid therefore poured in, and the emergency phase was gradually replaced by longer-term development.

3.1   Political context and the evolution of national ownership

Rwandan ownership was relatively strong early on. Already in 1994, i.e. several years before the ownership agenda and despite aid dependence, the government emphasized its policy independence (Zorbas 2011). At that time, most aid did not go directly to the government, co-ordination was poor, and institutional capacity and conditions were not favourable. By 2000, however, there was a firmly formulated development vision (RoR 2000), by 2004 a sophisticated aid co-ordination structure was in place, and by 2006 an aid policy was adopted, declaring how aid should be used and managed and that the government would assert genuine leadership (RoR 2006).

Since then, the Rwandan government has expediently followed the Paris agenda in terms of domestic policy formulation, aid co-ordination, policy dialogue, popular consultation, and more. National development plans and related documents are produced in a timely and professional manner, making up coherent policy frameworks tied to budgets, and relatively robust national systems for public financial management have been developed (GoS 2015: 3; GPEDC 2018). There is also an institutional set-up, including a permanent secretary's forum and a development partners co-ordination group with clearly delineated roles and responsibilities, along with numerous sector working groups, where the government regularly meets with aid providers and representatives of the private sector and civil society (RoR 2017: 30; Sida 2020: 8; UN 2017: 46f). Throughout, the Rwandan government's diligent assuming of ownership has been reflected in monitoring results and the country has continued to receive recognition for abiding by the Paris principles (GPEDC 2018; UN 2017: 14).

Early and sustained Rwandan policy independence, despite aid dependence, has been understood as largely based on the government's ability to use existing negotiating capital and appease donors, not least by persuasively using the development vocabulary. The government has long been saying what aid providers want to hear, strategically using rhetoric to manage its image and shape its relations (Desrosiers and Thomson 2011: 446; Laws 2021: 176; Zorbas 2011). A desire in the international community for African success stories and, as touched upon, a sense of guilt over not intervening during the genocide have also been seen to explain the leeway that Rwanda enjoys (Hasselskog 2020: O100). Meanwhile, aid providers appreciate the Rwandan leadership's development orientation and capacity, the general efficiency in policy-making and implementation, and the low level of corruption, which provide for efficient service delivery and make it an easy country to work with (Beswick 2011; EU/GoR 2014: 11; GoS 2015: 3; UN 2017: 14). Even when pursuing criticized practices, Rwanda has largely remained popular, enjoying donors' praise and trust, presented as a 'donor darling' or 'poster child' (Gaynor 2016: 779, 782; Grimm 2013: 87; Zorbas 2011: 105f) or at least as belonging to a group of privileged aid recipients (Desrosiers and Swedlund 2019: 436).

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The Rwandan government, however, has not stopped at dutifully complying with the Paris agenda but continues to decisively insist on its own agenda and priority issues. A renowned example is rural resettlement, where, despite donors' reluctance, the government has moved ahead (Newbury 2011; RoR 2015: 30, 2017: 15; van Leeuwen 2001). The government also actively de-emphasizes the importance of aid and refutes dependence. In its annual report on external development finance (EDF; RoR 2021: 8), development co-operation is singled out in a pie chart as part of total development resources, and it is stressed that 'most of Rwanda's financing for development came from its own resources (54 per cent)'. Graphically and verbally portraying aid as a minor part of development resources in this way is conspicuous for a country that is the world's eleventh most aid dependent, considering the share of ODA in central government expense (World Bank 2022).

Throughout, the Rwandan government resolutely manages its aid providers (Grimm 2013) and has come to regulate their role and influence and to direct their contributions (Hasselskog et al. 2017). For example, a division of labour has been imposed, with the government assigning sectors and deciding that a provider must not engage in more than three sectors (RoR 2021: 35; Sida 2020: 8). This limits donors' room for manoeuvre, and some of them report also feeling subjected to surveillance (Desrosiers and Swedlund 2019: 455). Since 2009, the government has closely monitored and assessed the quality of external finance and evaluated individual donors. Their performance on 14 detailed indicators is presented annually, along with comments and a green or red light on each indicator, for example showing whether they follow the labour division or work in more sectors than allowed (RoR 2021: 32–45).

3.2   National ambitions of local participation

Alongside increasing ownership and policy control, the Rwandan government persistently articulates its commitment to local participation and related ideals of empowerment and downward accountability (Hasselskog 2016). Stating that the political culture before 1994 was 'notable for the absence of accountability and citizen participation' (RoR 2008: 17, 57), policy documents promote participation as a way to reduce poverty, for 'the culture of people centred participative development to take root' (RoR 2001: 11), 'to enable and reactivate local people to participate in initiating, making, implementing and monitoring decisions and plans that concern them' (RoR 2001: 8), and to make local leaders directly accountable to the communities they serve (Hasselskog and Schierenbeck 2015; RoR 2008: 56ff). The 2003 constitution affirms that all Rwandans have the duty to participate in the development of the country, and in the most recent strategy for transformation, citizens' participation is declared a priority area (RoR 2017: 19).

Local participation is being promoted not least through decentralization of the public sector, which, strongly supported by international aid, remains a crucial part of the Rwandan government's political and developmental project (Chemouni 2014; Gaynor 2014, 2016; Hasselskog and Schierenbeck 2015; Kauzya 2007; RoR 2000: 12, 2001, 2018: 61; Tilburg 2008). The 2001 decentralization reform was centrally motivated by, and provided a legal framework for, local participation, the overall objective being 'to ensure political, economic, social, managerial/administrative and technical empowerment of local populations to fight poverty by participating in planning and management of their development process' (Mukamunana and Brynard 2005: 674; RoR 2001: 8;). One aim was to 'put people at the center of service delivery' (RoR 2018: 18) and participatory governance was to increase local government responsiveness, accountability, and transparency (RoR 2001: 9). Though the focus of the reform has gradually changed, it remains a priority to enhance 'citizen participation, empowerment and inclusiveness', for example by engaging 'the citizen at village level in participatory planning/prioritisation as well as budgeting' (RoR 2018: 39f). Throughout, there has been a particular focus on women (Nyiransabimana 2018; Powley 2008), with the current government vision stating that over its early

years, decentralization will be 'fully achieved with equal participation of women and men' (RoR 2015: 35).

Within this frame of decentralization, an increasing number of programmes have been launched as 'home-grown solutions' (HGSs), many of which are asserted to revive traditional participatory practices (Hasselskog 2016). Among the HGSs in which local participation is most emphasized are *ubudehe* and *umuganda*, developed specifically to ensure participation in planning and decision-making in the first decentralization phase (Gaynor 2014, 2016; RoR 2018: 62), and *imihigo*, presented in the revised decentralization policy as a model for bottom-up planning (RoR 2012b: 17). *Ubudehe* has gradually been replaced by the flagship programme 'Vision 2020 Umurenge', which was initially largely financed, and is still highly favoured, by foreign donors (RoR 2007; Hasselskog and Schierenbeck 2015). Its main component is local labour-intensive projects, such as the upgrading of terraced agricultural land and of roads. These projects are to be planned and implemented in a participatory manner, and people get paid for the work they do (Williams et al. 2020; Hasselskog and Schierenbeck 2015). *Umuganda*, meanwhile, implies unpaid compulsory community work, commonly every last Saturday of the month. The work to be conducted is to be determined by residents in order to respond to local needs and priorities, and work sessions are followed by a meeting for them to bring up concerns and receive information (Gaynor 2014; 2016; Hasselskog 2018; RoR 2015: 44). *Imihigo* is a comprehensive system of performance contracts for feeding local priorities upwards through levels of government, starting with households committing to reaching specified targets within a certain timeframe (Hasselskog 2016). Goals and targets are to be set at every level, each level thereby informing the levels above it of local needs and priorities and influencing national policies.

Throughout decentralization and other policies, the role of civil society is increasingly emphasized, recognized both as a participating player and a stakeholder itself and as a promoter of popular participation and organizer of consultative forums (RoR 2015: 5, 35, 2018: 62; RGB 2022). Here too, international aid providers are highly supportive, providing funds for specific CSO activities as well as technical support to improve their capacity to advocate for local issues and human rights, protect transparency and accountability, perform an oversight role, and increase the vibrancy of civil society overall (EU/GoR 2014: 26; GoS 2020: 3; Holvoet and Rombouts 2008: 593; Kantengwa et al. 2019: 80; Protik et al. 2018; UN 2019: 56ff). The Rwandan government also claims to facilitate civil society in various ways. For example, a non-governmental organization (NGO) law, enacted in 2008 and revised four years later, gives national NGOs the right 'to advocate, protect and promote human rights and other national values; and to express opinions and views on national policies and legislation' (RoR 2012a: 53). Along with the decentralization reform, this is intended to enable civil society to be involved in policy-making and local governance and development processes (ICNL 2022; Kantengwa et al. 2019), while the government will provide financial support and build the capacity of national NGOs (RoR 2012a: 45, 2017: 19). Dialogue with civil society is welcomed (Adamczyk 2012), the possibility of partnerships between the government and national NGOs is established (RoR 2012a: 44f, 58), and a recurrent objective is to strengthen such partnerships (RGB 2022; RoR 2017: 11, 15f). A Joint Action Development Forum (JADF) has been created to promote public sector co-operation with civil society (RoR 2017: 31), along with a range of other state mechanisms through which CSOs are to engage with decision-makers, thus enhancing citizen participation (Kantengwa et al. 2019: 43f; RGB 2022).

Despite the government's eloquent commitment to local participation and proclaimed promotion of it through decentralization, HGS, and civil society endorsement—and despite international aid resources—scholars and other observers severely criticize participatory practices in Rwanda. The decentralization reform is seen as top-down, extending the reach of the central state, strengthening upwards rather than downwards accountability, and not providing for citizens to participate in local planning and decision-making (Chemouni 2014; Gaynor 2016; Hasselskog and Schierenbeck

2015). Ostensibly participatory development programmes have been found to imply mainly labour and cash contributions and to be used to 'sensitize' people on national policies and targets rather than to allow them to express needs and suggestions (Behuria 2018; Chemouni, 2014; Gaynor 2016; Hasselskog 2018). Rwandan civil society, meanwhile, is seen as largely controlled by the national authorities (EU/GoR 2014: 26f; GoS 2020: 2; van Leeuwen 2008: 405, 414ff), which strongly promote a service delivery function of civil society, rather than that of a 'watchdog', and make CSOs align their work with government policies (Adamczyk 2012: 68; ICNL 2022; RoR 2018: 22). Overall, observers find that the quality of participation in Rwandan governance and development processes is inadequate (GoS 2015: 2; Kantengwa et al. 2019: 5; UN 2017: 26).

3.3   CSO experiences of national ownership and local participation

So, given this determined move towards firm national ownership and management of donors and the declared ambitions of local participation, but also the firm critique of participation practices, how does the prevailing form of national ownership play out among CSOs and what experiences are there of local participation among them and those who are involved in their activities?

CSO relations with the government and with foreign funders

CSO interviewees recurrently emphasize that they take careful note of and make sure to work in line with national priorities. 'Everything is aligned with the existing policies of the government' (Rwa int 25). Local authorities may also ask a CSO to adjust its activities, for example by providing certain input, prioritizing certain areas, or including certain people, and the CSOs apparently accept such requests for as long as they persist. 'Recently the influence is less intense because we have included their perspectives' (Rwa int 18). A sort of government influence that is commonly mentioned concerns the selection of beneficiaries, which often follows the official *ubudehe* categorization. 'The authorities provide people from category one' (Rwa int 1). Apart from such continuous adjustment to government priorities, organizations need the authorities' overall approval of their activities, permission to operate in the area, and acceptance of their reports, otherwise they cannot continue their work. 'If they see that something is wrong, they say: please change this!' (Rwa int 27).

Local authorities also make use of CSOs to help fulfil their performance contracts, with several CSO representatives describing how their activities are geared towards existing targets. 'We have ten *imihigo* targets, which we are contributing to at the district level' (Rwa int 37). This is confirmed by beneficiaries who note that a CSO is encouraging them to act in line with government targets, for example by being included in the health insurance and having a vegetable garden (Rwa int 14).

While most interviewees do not reflect explicitly on this affiliation with national policies and adjustment to authorities' requirements, a few CSO representatives openly regret that they are not free to determine their activities.

> Overall, we have to align with government strategies. We are an independent organization, but that does not mean that we come with our own agenda. You see, this is Rwanda … You cannot come with your own agenda … I don't think that there is a single organization which has its own agenda. (Rwa int 34)

The national representative of another organization, meanwhile, compares their work with that of CSOs in other countries, pointing to being closely observed.

> The government of Rwanda is very different from other governments. They will register you, they will give you a certificate for maybe five years, but only after a

rigorous exercise. Then, there is a mechanism for monitoring what you do, and if you said that you would build five classrooms, they will not clear you until they have verified that you actually built five classrooms. (Rwa int 36)

The same person has seen examples of activities not getting such government clearance. 'Some projects are very tricky in a country like Rwanda. I know projects that were closed because they were perceived as *kugumura abaturage* [inciting the population to revolt]' (Rwa int 36).

While thus aligned with government policies, many CSO activities are financed by foreign actors, whom CSO representatives believe are also promoting certain priorities. 'If someone is giving you money, there is an agenda that they are trying to advance' (Rwa int 31). According to the interviewees, however, they adjust to funders' agendas only to a limited extent: 'Once there is a call for proposal, we apply if it fits in our focus areas … We're not going for every call or every opportunity' (Rwa int 34).

External funders' influence is still recognized as a problem. 'Western countries play a big role … Some US based organisations will stop the funding, saying that "if our country is not accepting this, why are you implementing it?" This can affect how we proceed. The big fish are dictating how we do it' (Rwa int 31). Organizations continuously consider what kind of influence to accept. 'You have to make a choice. Do I stop working on what I'm doing, so that I can get funding from USAID? … It's not an easy decision to make' (Rwa int 30). While this organization has turned down calls that do not correspond with its agenda, its representative has seen other organizations switch focus depending on what funding is available.

The same person also points to ever changing global trends affecting their work. 'Ten years ago, there was no funding for climate change and now climate change is one of the new areas' (Rwa int 30). The national representative of another organization confirms the impact of such trends. 'You have to focus on current issues. Currently environmental issues are prioritised, funding for that is the most available … And they influence our mindset, we immediately say "Okay, these are the issues in the environment"' (Rwa int 25). In addition to shifts in global priorities, it is well known among the CSOs that individual donors also have their preferences. 'Northern governments have their own agendas … Sweden will say women's empowerment, women and girls, I think any programme you do for them must be around that. Denmark will be about advocacy and protection. Canada now is women and environment' (Rwa int 36). Certain work methods may also be favoured by foreign funders.

> They told us that we must do joint advocacy, include it in the activities, among our indicators, in the logical framework. At the end of the day, you're doing it because they told you … You still don't know how to organize it. You've put it in the report, but you haven't thought it through. (Rwa int 25)

Reporting is generally perceived as a burdensome aspect of working with foreign funders. 'If you have 20 donors, you have to report to all of them with their different reporting requirements. It's huge work' (Rwa int 30). Meanwhile, it is clear that CSOs' commitments to foreign funders must be fulfilled. 'A lot of money comes from the German government … They receive regular reports, and sometimes they come back to us with concerns that have to be addressed' (Rwa int 18). But there is also experience of funders being flexible and receptive to local demands. 'If we planned for something, but find that it is not needed by the community, we go back to our donors and tell them, and they are able to change and adapt to the needs of the community' (Rwa int 38).

The CSOs thus continuously navigate in relation to government and donor agendas. However, while adjusting to foreign funders, or not, appears to be a choice, aligning with government policies

is not open to discussion. In one of the CSOs this is perceived as a change and apparently a relief. 'We no longer take commands from donors … Instead we decide according to national guidelines' (Rwa int 1). However, the Rwandan government's external relations may also have a strong impact on organizations, beyond their control. 'Imagine when Rwanda and France had issues. Just imagine what happened to an NGO that was getting funding from France. That can happen between Rwanda and the US, it can happen between Rwanda and any other country. And when that happens, aid stops' (Rwa int 30). According to one interviewee, the Rwandan government's approach affects their access to foreign funding in yet another way.

> We have lost almost all the donors. Why? Because when they compare us to our neighbours, say Congo … We don't present needs as Congo does. In Congo it is *byacitse* [it's an emergency], give me, give me. Here it is *agaciro, kwihesha agaciro, kwihagararaho* [dignity, self-determination, self-support]. It's a language that makes people think that Rwanda is becoming a middle-income country. (Rwa int 36)

Expectations and dynamics of local participation

Throughout this navigating in relation to government and donor agendas, CSO representatives are clearly familiar with prevailing priorities and favoured approaches, including that of local participation. Most of them recognize the benefits of engaging beneficiaries in identifying priorities and solutions. 'We don't come and solve their problems, we involve them in the planning, they decide what they need' (Rwa int 30). Some CSO representatives also spontaneously point to problems of non-participation. 'Without the consent and acceptance and participation of people, the project cannot succeed' (Rwa int 18). 'If you just give them animals, the animals will die tomorrow' (Rwa int 3). Meanwhile, several of the interviewees have worked long enough to recognize a change in approach, moving away from a state of emergency when 'we were just providing things' (Rwa int 2). One of the national representatives recalls:

> We used to sit in this office, and we would say 'Well, at this site, what are the needs? Oh, there is stunting. Okay can we do a project on stunting?' Then you made a proposal, and you waited for Denmark or Canada or whoever to say 'Oh, we have some money to fight stunting'. And then, when you got the money, you would go to that site with the assumption that there were stunted children. But either those children would not be there, or the strategies that you thought that you were going to use would not be appropriate. So, we've left that approach of top-down planning. (Rwa int 36)

Apart from ensuring that activities are locally appropriate and effective, some CSO representatives emphasize another purpose of involving the local population which has to do with making claims. 'It helps citizens to know their rights … to know that it is their right to receive good services, and to realise that it is their responsibility to ask' (Rwa int 25). 'We are strengthening them to be able to advocate for what they do not have, and that the government should give [it to] them' (Rwa int 36).

While familiar with the ideal of local participation and convinced of its benefits, CSO representatives also identify a number of obstacles to attaining participatory practices. A major problem is intended beneficiaries' previous experiences. 'When a citizen sees a donor coming, he knows that he will be given something tangible' (Rwa int 27). An inclination to accept what is being offered and do what is requested, rather than making one's own suggestions, is also confirmed by beneficiaries. 'My first role was to be a good child and implement everything they told me to do' (Rwa int 11). 'We do whatever the government asks us to do' (Rwa int 17). 'We have to do what they tell us, and to behave as they tell us' (Rwa int 29). Such experiences and expectations make it

difficult for CSO actors to induce people to be actively involved. 'It takes a lot of effort to convince them that they should participate' (Rwa int 2). Another problem encountered by one of the organizations is that intended beneficiaries are suspicious and do not trust that they will be allowed to keep what they achieve. 'Maybe there is something behind. Maybe soon they will come and say that this field is no longer yours' (Rwa int 19).

A general obstacle, meanwhile, is lack of time. People are busy making a living, perhaps working for a salary, and a CSO may be unable to provide good enough financial incentives for them to get involved in its activities. This is highlighted by beneficiaries expressing the most appreciation for the paid work provided by an organization and being critical when the payment is not enough or when it ends. 'No one wants to work together for nothing … You were paid a small sum, and worked nine hours, from morning to 3 o'clock' (Rwa int 23). 'During the project, many had jobs. Now they are unemployed' (Rwa int 21). Time is also a constraint for the organizations. As touched upon, reporting takes time, but so does participation. 'For government funds in Rwanda, they need a report after three months. With that timeline for conceiving a project, implementing, and reporting it … it's hard to involve the beneficiaries' (Rwa int 31).

Despite operating in relation to government and donor agendas, and encountering numerous obstacles to local participation, CSO representatives as well as beneficiaries point to instances of people having substantial influence on organizations' activities. One example is the selection of beneficiaries. Although, as seen, the authorities may 'provide' people from a certain *ubudehe* category, it is also common that people choose themselves to join an activity, or are recruited jointly by the community: 'anyone could vote for whomever he wanted' (Rwa int 22).

Most examples of participants' influence, however, concern the choice of input. In a case of tree planting, farmers complained about the species and made the organization provide fruit trees, though this had not been in the original plan. 'We gathered to choose which species to be used in this village and how these species will be protected from animal destruction' (Rwa int 21). Also at the suggestion of participants, they were allowed to sell some of the seedlings that they produced, and when people said that they needed better knowledge on tree nursery growing and seed collection, such training was provided. Yet another suggestion was also related to training: 'There was a farmer saying "We're having three hours of training and we are thirsty. Next time you organize something …" So, now we provide fanta and *amandazi* [donuts] to the participants' (Rwa int 19).

In relation to another CSO's activities, a group of people came up with the idea of having a dedicated nurse at the health centre providing care specifically to them, while certain materials would be provided by peer educators rather than at the health centre. Both suggestions were accommodated by the organization. Another example is when people could propose what sorts of domestic animals they would receive, depending on what they expected to be able to raise and sell. 'They won't give you an animal that you're not happy with' (Rwa int 5). One participant, meanwhile, decided to not go for animals at all.

> They gave us 20,000 to buy animals, but I was asking myself 'If I buy this animal, how will I take care of it? How will I feed it?' So I decided to rent land instead to grow tomatoes, expecting to buy animals after I harvest my tomatoes and raise a larger capital. They were planning to give me an animal. But I realized that buying that animal would slow my development. (Rwa int 8)

While this person's preference was accepted, there are limits to beneficiaries' room for manoeuvre. A young woman highlights that every choice must be considered worthwhile by the CSO. While she was determined to take up her studies again, others had other preferences. 'Some think they

cannot study anymore and say "Let me sell charcoal, sell eggs or avocadoes, and work for money". Everyone has their own choice—unless you make a bad choice, then they won't help you' (Rwa int 29).

3.4 The nature and role of local participation in Rwandan-owned development

While there are disparate views of the value of the Rwandan development model, there is agreement that it is determined by a small group of people, with decision- and policy-making dominated by an elite (Hasselskog 2015, 2016; Keijzer et al. 2019: 7; Straus and Waldorf 2011). As noted, Rwandan ownership is also strong. There is an explicit development vision and the government sets its own development agenda, determines priorities, and formulates strategies. It is assertive in relation to aid providers, providing elaborate structures for dialogue, while playing down the importance of aid resources and closely managing aid providers. Meanwhile, and as also noted, the government eloquently commits to and actively promotes local participation.

Our interviews with CSO representatives and others affected by their activities show that organizations make sure to operate in line with government strategies and goals. Their activities are, for example, designed so as to contribute to reaching district *imihigo* targets, while local officials may 'provide' target groups and require CSOs to adjust their work throughout. Overall, the expected role of CSOs is to contribute to implementing national policies. While most interviewees express no dissatisfaction with this way of aligning with and serving the government agenda, there are also critical voices, pointing to CSOs being constrained and controlled: 'this is Rwanda'. Foreign funders, meanwhile, are assumed to have their own particular priorities, to which organizations choose to partly adjust. This, too, is apparently not perceived as a major problem but something expected that must be continuously handled. However, there are also indications that CSOs are affected by the government's approach to aid and aid providers, with the promotion of national self-sufficiency and playing down of aid dependence, decreasing their funding opportunities.

As Rwandan CSOs thus innately navigate in relation to the government as well as to foreign funders, national ownership plays out in their close and compliant alignment with government policies along with their more selective and limited adjustment to donor priorities, while also being affected, beyond their control, by the relation between the two.

The empirical material also shows that CSO representatives are familiar with and favourable towards local participation, proficiently talking about its value and pointing to problems of non-participation. There are well-known obstacles to participation, such as prevailing experiences and expectations of hand-outs and top-down instructions, and of people preferring—or having to prioritize—paid work rather than participating in development activities. Still, there are also numerous instances of beneficiaries having substantial influence on CSO activities. However—and though a couple of CSO representatives mention empowering and emancipatory purposes, such as knowing and claiming your rights—the examples encountered are of the sort that promote efficiency and cost-effectiveness by helping select locally or individually appropriate input. While beneficiaries appear happy with the influence they are allowed, it is thus not a kind of participation that could provide for alternative development priorities, strategies, or models that could challenge the dominant development model or hold decision- and policy-makers to account. In combination with CSO compliance with government policy, their activities thus make people follow government priorities, and the limited forms of participation implied come to serve the realization of the nationally owned development model.

4 Cambodia

After a genocide in the late 1970s and a civil war throughout the 1980s, in the 1990s Cambodia emerged as one of the poorest countries in the world, with acute lack of just about everything a modern society needs, such as infrastructure, education, economic resources, modern judiciary, and political institutions (Curtis 1998). Simultaneously, the international development community harboured a collective bad conscience for allowing Cambodia to fare so poorly—as it were, caught on the frontline of the cold war for two decades—and flooded the country with aid and good will for a speedy reconstruction from 1994 onwards.

4.1 Political context and the evolution of national ownership

The sudden and massive inflow of aid was not easy to handle for the central government, working with an acute deficit of human resources and harbouring many internal conflicts. Throughout the 1990s, ownership of the development agenda was at an astoundingly low level. Several development actors—NGOs, bilaterals, and even UN-based actors—operated in the country without government permission or even without central government knowledge (cf. Bernander et al. 1995). However, this was neither illegal—since there were no laws regulating it—nor deceptive—since there was a shared understanding at the time that Cambodia needed all the support it could get (Rudengren and Öjendal 2002). Heavily dependent not only on aid funds but also on technical assistance, the country has been described as 'donor-driven'; as a 'laboratory for donor trial-and-error experiments' (Ear 2013: 10); and as trapped in low ownership, with lack of state capacity and lack of donor trust reinforcing each other (Hubbard 2005: 367).

A first major attempt to retake control of the development agenda came with Cambodia's First Socio-Economic Development Plan (FSEDP; RGC 1996). The agenda had until then been crudely hijacked by the international donor community, pursuing their version of the 'Washington consensus' with liberal ideas and values that were anything but home grown (cf. Mehmet 1997). This was the first comprehensive development plan derived from the Cambodian government in the modern era. To (start to) take control of the development agenda was not a trivial process, since the government was divided and the country in desperate need of the resources in question. The 1996 plan was followed by a 'triangular strategy' in 1999 and a 'rectangular strategy' in 2004, which based national development (and the role of aid and development planning) on four pillars. With the Paris Declaration in 2005, the process of taking control over the development agenda was pushed further by the international ideal of national ownership. While all actors in Cambodia were thus rhetorically heading towards the same ideal, frictions and disagreements were common, especially in sensitive sectors.

As regards government–donor relations, from the starting point of stark donor dominance, over time a more organized form of co-operation emerged in sequence with the aid itself becoming more structured, long term, and sustainable. Initially there were annual major donor meetings abroad where bi- and multilaterals outbid one another in pledges and Cambodia was a passive receiver, but these were soon replaced by in-country, government-hosted meetings and subsequently developed into sector-wide approaches and adherent working groups. From the early 2000s, the government also became more assertive, firmly expressing its priorities and less readily accepting aid conditionalities. A noteworthy breaking point was the establishment of a law on democratic decentralization under firm government control—a process the donors had largely dominated and financed up to this point and expected to have continued control over (civil servant, Department for International Development, field notes 2006). Moreover, from 2005

onwards, donors took half a step back out of respect for the Paris Declaration and tried to co-ordinate better among themselves and await government initiatives (civil servant, Sida, field notes 2008). In 2006, the first comprehensive aid strategy was adopted, stating that ownership was already strong and setting out to further strengthen government leadership (RGC 2006, 2014). A national focal point for issues related to development co-operation was also established, a more coherent policy framework constructed, and ambitious development targets set (EU 2014).

The 'rectangular strategy', which has now passed through four phases, has gradually become more sophisticated and more deeply owned by the government, and has increasingly become the backbone of the country's development policies. The current strategy, 2018–23, places governance reform at the centre and circles that with four prioritized areas: human resource development, private sector development, inclusive and sustainable development, and economic diversification. These are in turn supported by underlying sub-policies and implementation mechanisms (RGC 2018). The government claims that, through the third phase, social expenditure has been boosted by a factor of almost three and asserts that virtually all social indicators in the country are pointing sharply upwards (RGC 2018). The rectangular strategy is part of the 'Political Platform of the Royal Government of the Sixth Legislature of the National Assembly' and acts as a framework for the more detailed National Strategic Development Plan, 2019–2023 (RGC 2018). There are thus seemingly major policy efforts and documents to steer national development ambitions, although it is doubtful to what extent these strategies and plans reach into communes and villages and make a tangible impression.

In Cambodia, this gradual, though uneven, process from donor dominance to national ownership was largely driven by growing independence, reliance on alternative donors (mainly China) to the 'traditional' ones, the country's own capacity, and, thereby, increasing ability to keep donors at arms' length. In late 2017, then, the trajectory towards a more controlling central government and increased national ownership was further emphasized when national politics—after a period of tension—returned to political authoritarianism. Since then, political control has been strengthened through the government's overall control of society and zero tolerance of any activity that deviates politically from the party line (cf. Andersen et al. 2019). In a crude exercise of national sovereignty, and with a very strict approach to human rights/democracy activism and any actors supporting such processes, internationally funded development activities are strictly monitored, and the government has very low tolerance of any development aid that could be understood as politically oppositional. This has alienated many donors and international NGOs and much development aid, hence also putting a lid on any development debate and negotiations. By the early 2020s, recipient–donor dialogue was close to a standstill. International development co-operation (as it is known) with Cambodia became a fragment of what it once was, and external development interventions in the local context were reduced to a low level.

4.2   National ambitions of local participation

The hasty 'democratization' after the peace agreement in 1991 (see Öjendal 1996) did not land easily in Cambodia, both for historical reasons (Chandler 1983) and because of remaining deep-seated conflicts in the political community and in the societal fabric (cf. Öjendal and Ou 2013). With a liberal constitution and an elective democracy in 1993, inclusion, bottom-up processes, and local participation were introduced across the board, although unevenly and sometimes in contrast to local beliefs (Blunt and Turner 2005). The liberal foundation for the 'new' Cambodia, as expressed in the constitution of 1993, was in turn strengthened by the Western-based development industry, which urged the country to develop further in that direction, all the way from individual projects up to national reforms. Throughout the 1990s, vast resources were spent in the name of local development, with a common request for 'local participation' attached to them. This was in the midst of the 'third wave of democratisation' (Huntington 1996) in the post-cold war era,

rendering every 'reconstruction process' around the globe heavy on democratization and democratic practices. Moreover, the development discourse emphasized the significance of participation and sought to activate bottom-up processes at every level and at all sites (Plummer and Tritt 2010; World Bank/Asia Foundation 2013).

This was at the time an awkward process for Cambodia, which not only had had two decades of violence and dictatorship but also had a deep history of political hierarchies and top-down governance (Chandler 1983). For many—officials and people at large—this was a new approach, containing uncertainties and novelty (Hasselskog 2009). Although 'local participation' was constantly on the agenda, there were many sceptics regarding the viability of this approach (e.g., Blunt and Turner 2005) and it was indeed not a simple transformation. Yet many Cambodians had survived harsh times before by being pragmatic, and at the time it was 'paid off' for both officials and citizens to adopt a participatory approach to local development. 'If we have to do participation, we can do participation' (government official, field notes 1997). In combination with the heavy-handed presence of the international development community, these processes had a massive impact on development practices in Cambodia, especially at lower levels. The outcomes, however, were not always the intended ones, and ethnographic research and donor assessments show that people's participation remained limited (Andersen et al. 2019; Blunt and Turner 2005; Hasselskog 2009; Pellini and Ayres 2007; Plummer and Tritt 2010; UNDP 2010: 40, 61; World Bank/Asia Foundation 2013).

As a major example, in the mid-1990s, the UN-sponsored project CARERE (Cambodian Rehabilitation and Regeneration) was becoming established throughout the north- west part of the country, with a grounded method for local participation and enhanced local democratization, *inter alia* through introducing locally elected Village Development Committees and a participatory 'local planning process' (Hasselskog 2009). It was met overall with a positive response from the local population and local authorities alike—possibly also because it was well resourced and worked with local infrastructure investments. This initiative grew and by 1996 had become a nationwide programme named Seila ('foundation in stone'). This in turn met with success and was taken over by the government (Andersen 2004; Evans 2000; Rudengren and Öjendal 2002). Eventually it was scaled up to an official reform of democratic decentralization, including commune elections and budget-controlling commune councils creating a full second layer of government (Öjendal and Dellnäs 2013). The local democratic practices of this reform were sustained, and elections have been held uninterruptedly every five years since 2002. During this period, the commune level became the hub for local governance and development. Overall, the government did not pursue local participation in its own right, but it did maintain the bottom-up principles of the democratic decentralization and its involvement in local development, hence supporting local participation, though it was 'controlled' by the authorities.

Although major and very significant, this programme was but one of a multitude of participatory initiatives. A very vibrant NGO sector worked with a multitude of bottom-up approaches across the board. The scope of civil society and the intensity of its development work was immense, ranging from CBOs (community-based organizations) with very localized activities to international NGOs with major operations in the country (Öjendal 2013). In a World Bank study from 2009, it was estimated that there were more than 8,000 CBOs, close to 2,000 CSOs, around 400 labour unions, and many other relevant organizations, including a vast number of village-based 'traditional associations' (Malena and Chhim 2009: 27–8). Fishery and forest communities were emerging in large numbers and often took a strong role in controversial cases involving local conflicts. This was complemented by mass organizations spanning from unions to student organizations. By the mid-2010s, a subculture of sorts had evolved nationwide, fostering organization, self-management, and bottom-up work. But simultaneously, it was widely argued by researchers that these numbers masked a rather low activity level overall and an uncertain degree of sustainability (Malena and

Chhim 2009; Ou and Kim 2014; Öjendal 2013). Bilateral donors rarely directly supported Cambodian CSOs but rather created a layer between themselves and the organization. Two controversies rose to prominence. The first was that Western donors critiqued Cambodian CSOs for being internally undemocratic, having no constituency, and acting more like localized consultancy companies (PAT 2003; cf. Öjendal 2013). The second was human rights organizations' and international NGOs' focus on particularly sensitive issues touching on money or politics, such as deforestation. In the case of the latter, the government reacted strongly, for instance expelling the NGO Global Witness after a series of spectacular reports and confrontations. In relation to the former, most CSOs struck a balance, making them acceptable in the eyes of the government, but through a fair degree of self-censorship. Hence, government–bilateral relations were not very badly damaged.

For the government led by the CPP (Cambodian People's Party), on the other hand, the broad and often progressive NGO sector has for decades represented a growing problem of (what they perceive as) illegitimate interference in politics. After an intense debate since it was first proposed in 2011, in 2015 the controversial Law on NGOs (LANGO) was established regulating the work of NGOs. It included, *inter alia*, strict demands on registration, reporting of activities, and financial declarations. These demands are must be met within a strict timeframe, often unachievable for a wide range of NGOs, many of them being local and working without comprehensive documentation. Moreover, there is a clause in the law demanding that NGOs be politically neutral, making any disagreement with central or local government subject to suspicions of siding with 'the opposition'. Failure to comply with these rules may lead to withdrawal of permission to work or even prosecution. Moreover, the law encourages local authorities to monitor and control local NGOs and their work (*Khmer Times*, 7 July 2020). There has, predictably, been widespread critique of the LANGO, for instance visible in a 'Joint Statement' of 28 Cambodian NGOs in December 2020. The NGO community at large deems the law unconstitutional and argues that it prevents NGOs from doing their work and has curtailed their ability to work for poverty alleviation, social improvement, and good governance. As stated in a carefully worded statement:

> We perceive that the law sets obligations which violate the autonomy of associations and non-governmental organizations, as it requires them to submit reports to the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Economy and Finance, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, as well as to comply with complicated taxation procedures. The wording of the Law also enables state officials to interpret provisions based on political situations and circumstances in a manner which can cause confusion and implementation not reflective of the contents of the Law. (Centre for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights 2020)[2]

The government, however, refutes this perspective:

> If LANGO were restrictive, why does the number of newly registered NGOs keep rising, making the total number at nearly 6,000? The fact is that the grievances simply come from a handful of the heavily politicised and foreign-funded NGOs, demanding transparency, but refusing to prove themselves transparent (*Khmer Times*, 9 October 2021)[3]

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[2] A comprehensive review of the NGO critique of LANGO is available at Centre for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (2020a).

[3] This was reportedly stated at the 'Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Cambodia', held on 6 October 2021 at the UN in Geneva.

The above provides an intriguing image of the growth of civil society and its participatory practices, where the fanning out of the activity of NGOs and their increasing local presence, on the one hand, and the democratic decentralization, on the other hand, hold promises for the strengthening of a participatory subculture. However, with the adoption of the LANGO and the re-entrance of authoritarianism in 2017, the significance of the local participatory subculture faded, funding was withdrawn, and the number of international organizations dwindled (cf. Cohen 2019; Morgenbesser 2019). With the central government's more authoritarian political role, independent development activities, local participation, and self-organization have reportedly been discouraged. Development activities by NGOs are tightly monitored from the central level, and unions, NGOs, and human rights organizations have, in phases, been challenged, pressed, or outright forbidden to do their work.

Many NGO workers have been branded 'political activists', convicted, and sentenced to considerable time in prison. The first and perhaps most high-profile case was the US-funded and well-reputed National Democratic Institute (NDI), which was forcibly closed in September 2017 (Meyn 2017). As a result of the LANGO and the return of authoritarianism, the entire NGO sector has been curtailed and has gone through damaging self-censorship in order to be able to continue its work. Interestingly, although at a very slow pace, a revision of LANGO is being negotiated between the NGO community and the government.

4.3 CSO experiences of national ownership and local participation

So, given this gradual, though uneven, increase of national ownership until the pronounced step towards central control in 2017, and given the government's ambiguous approach to local participation, how does the prevailing form of national ownership play out among Cambodian CSOs? What experiences are there of local participation among them and those who are involved in their activities? While empirical research has been extremely limited in the country since 2018, as noted in the methods section, in 2022, we conducted 20 interviews with representatives of three CSOs, on which the following is based.

CSO relations with the government and with foreign funders

The demand to comply with the government's stricter rules tends to divide development agents at local levels. The most significant shift from earlier periods may be the repeated observation made by local development practitioners that when you work under the current government regime (including its strict requests on registration and reporting), you risk losing contact with and funding from the broader development community as well as from some development actors still trying to maintain an independent stance. It is cautiously explained to us that complying with the government's stricter control reduces the space to do development work in a credible way. The historical stigma of being co-opted by, or even part of, the government weighs down on the current situation of international organizations and the locals alike. 'After being approved by government in 2018, I feel we are being discriminated by other organisations' (Cam int 1). If we lower the gaze to a more local level, the same trend is reportedly equally visible: 'The local participation has dropped significantly' (Cam int 1). Yet the same respondent notes that 'I am the one who makes crucial and final decisions … The government will usually follow accordingly.' Such sentiments we have heard from several sources, indicating that a certain degree of self-censorship is ongoing, allowing at least a minimum of continuation of CSOs' development work. So, seemingly, complying with government dictates gives space to work and offers a certain degree of security, but on the other hand leads to reduced legitimacy in the development community as well as with the local population.

Others emphasize the enhanced participation of local authorities: for many CSOs, relations with the authorities have become paramount. 'We need a good relationship and open communication with the [local] authorities' and, to further emphasize the significance of this, 'Without the participation of the [local] authorities, [the] project would not go forward' (Cam int 10). For some, possibly in uncontroversial sectors, this is not much of a problem but rather a source of comfort. 'When they know that [the work of the CSO] aligns with the national plan, their thoughts and actions become activated and improved' (Cam int 2). An executive director of a development-CSO observes the dual change of '[Local authorities'] participation has improved a lot in the last five years' but also that 'donors have sponsored much less' (Cam int 3; cf. Cam int 8).

Interestingly, the exact opposite is also frequently reported, where local authorities are suspicious, critical, and unwelcoming to the presence of CSOs and their programmes. One interviewee stated that 'the local authority did not know me well so they were not very welcoming. They kept questioning our motive and intent' (Cam int 17). Another CSO worker shared the same experience: 'The local authorities used to be [good] to work with. [They were difficult initially], but after getting to know one another, we developed a partnership' (Cam int 13). Sometimes the situation was explicitly politicized '[local authorities] may suspect that my group is politically motivated. This creates fear in my group and discourages them from conducting the project [well]' (Cam int 18). And explicitly referring to the shift of politics in 2018: 'I have some co-operation problems, because of the change in commune councils. For example, [as relates to] law and order, the previous commune council was determined to enforce this, but the current commune council does not dare to exercise their rights' (Cam int 12).

In this context it should be noted that this investigation is based on development CSOs that are still working locally, hence these are the ones that have adjusted and found a way to co-operate with the authorities. Therefore, the selection of CSOs may inadvertently be tilted towards more co-operative actors. One CSO that was still working locally expressed this dilemma: 'civil society faces challenges in adjusting to what the government wants. They do adjust if it is beneficial to communities, but if it is in opposition to our vision, we cannot' (Cam int 12). Some CSOs have left or seriously downscaled their operations, and these have presumedly had deeper co-operation problems with local authorities or have chosen not to adapt to present circumstances. We do not know the depth of these difficulties or the number of CSO affected.

While contacts with the local authorities have become increasingly pivotal, relations with donors have weakened. A project manager states that 'donors' and [CSOs'] behaviour does not align [any more]' (Cam int 2), presumably because the CSOs have been forced to follow government policy more closely. A director observes, 'After being approved … by the government, we receive less funding from [foreign] NGOs. We have also experienced less co-operation from the locals' (Cam int 1). The CSOs seem to some extent to have been abandoned by foreign funders (morally or financially), as indicated in the response of a regional co-ordinator: '[We] do not get any direct feedback from the donors' (Cam int 10). Funding agencies have seemingly become very restrictive, interfering with contracted CSOs. 'Before, the donor would come and evaluate almost every week … and they would make a lot of complaints. However, for the second phase, it has gotten significantly less' (Cam int 4). This is generally perceived as a good thing by the respondent, allowing the local organization to 'work more freely' and under less pressure. Demands on quantitative goals are limited as 'no quotas are set' or demanded (Cam int 4). Possibly, funding agents are reluctant to keep a high profile locally because that could disturb the local CSOs' relations with local authorities, fitting the pattern of overall less presence of donors on the development scene since 2018.

Expectations and dynamics of local participation

Above, we saw one interviewee claiming that local participation is harder now when the CSOs are under stricter government control, distancing them from the local population. Interestingly, others report the contrary: a high and satisfying degree of local participation. '[The villagers'] participation has been very active as they seem to want to learn more' (Cam int 9; cf. Cam int 7). One local co-ordinator said that 'for the local participation, there is a significant number of people who join in the trainings … the number is impressive. For example [in a recent meeting], of 50 people invited, 47 turned up' (Cam int 4). Another respondent mentioned that participation was great and '[we have] at least 40 per cent women [in our meetings], but we tend to set the number of participants beforehand [and then just call this many to the meeting]'. The same interviewee continues: 'youth participation has increased significantly. Not only the number of youths who are volunteering, but also their commitment to the projects' (Cam int 4). This is a form of local participation where the headcount defines how many want to/should join a meeting/training and the number turning up is defined as the degree of success of participation. It is not organic or political and is (definitely) not a decision-making form of participation, as is often assumed in the literature on local participation. From this idealized form of participation, the participation seen in this local context could not be seen as satisfying. This does not necessarily take away the fact that the CSOs have a significant presence and reach a lot of people.

Another common response was that 'participation is … more active [now] because we can have various meetings with authorities and commune councils in all projects, compared to some past projects that lack[ed] the participation from the government side' (Cam int 12), reflecting a conception of 'local participation' as co-operation between CSOs and local authorities. This conception had many variations: '[we] have developed a [new] partnership where I am invited to various commune meetings and listen to the decision-making' (Cam int 13). One development worker got so close to the commune council that she 'was invited by the local authority to join the dispute settlement committee' (Cam int 16). Another CSO worker stated that 'the local authority joins me teaching [the villagers]. Sometimes they would join fully, and sometimes they would only join half-way, but they will always encourage the villagers to join and stay for the full teaching' (Cam int 17). Unsurprisingly in an authoritarian system, the line between co-operation and control may be fine at times. This paragraph shows more than anything else that participation by local authorities in CSO activities has been increasing, and that this is a part of CSO workers' conception of local participation.

Many of the interviewed CSO workers act as educators, mediators in local conflicts, or advisers on the legal situation. The identification and appointment of these workers is a little random and far from previous demands (see above) on village elections and bottom-up processes. In one instance it was stated that 'The voters were limited to around 25–30 people from the village' and 'No criteria is set as to what the elected representative must fulfil'. Moreover, 'it is up to the village chief to select as long as they are from the village' (Cam int 4). In other cases, workers are reported to have been selected by the commune chief (Cam int 5; Cam int 7). Some have simply volunteered and been appointed as a result of having shown interest (Cam int 15). There are seemingly very thin democratic/participatory practices involved in these selection processes, and people are rather appointed or even recruited and employed. Hence the typical pattern is that CSO workers are appointed by their organizations or by the commune council (or by some random coincidence) based on loyalty or merit, rather than being the local population's choice and representative.

In the first decade of the 2000s, there was a lot of emphasis from the side of the international development community on the internal democracy in contracted Cambodian CSOs (Bryld et al. 2012: 37). The contemporary environment among Cambodian CSOs is a far cry from those demands. The critique of centralized and non-democratic structures in the management of CSOs

is more valid than ever. On a direct question as to whether external influence has an impact on the organization's activities, the reply was 'I am the director, therefore, I am the one who makes the project' (Cam int 3). In contrast, an interviewee further down in the hierarchy answered: '[I have] never been involved in any important decision-making and [my] team only follows what we are instructed to do' (Cam int 6). This was followed by: '[The central CSO] has never asked for any suggestions or comments from us, so I cannot say whether our views are taken seriously or not' (Cam int 6). Another interviewee stated as a matter of fact that '[The CSO] was the one making the decision as to how the project is conducted. My group only conduct the project as instructed' (Cam int 18). A lengthy quote summarizes this dilemma well:

> The main decision-makers are the director and the donors. They are the ones who define the action plan and its activities … For example, when the aforementioned project ends and a new proposal is submitted to continue the project, they will make changes if needed. Furthermore, there are meetings between the programme officers and the board of directors where they can make suggestions and ask for opinions on certain projects. (Cam int 14)

Centralism and top-down management seem again (or still) to be the norm politically and internally, as the local CSO workers are consulted only to a limited degree.

4.4 The nature and role of local participation in Cambodian-owned development

In our review above, we see how increased national ownership and especially the recent political evolution in Cambodia has divided the local development community. It is noted how complying development agents enjoy a higher degree of co-operation with local authorities, how a certain form of 'defensive' local participation has arisen, and that emancipating or decision-making forms of participation are entirely absent. International donors seem to commonly avoid interfering in development processes locally. Moreover, we note how internal structures of CSOs have gone 'back to the future', meaning that a certain central control/top-down approach has emerged/returned. With a historical perspective, this may be the 'natural' way of pursuing local participation in Cambodia, but it is not the way that was advocated by the international donor community until recently (cf. Plummer and Tritt 2010). With stronger national ownership, a more restrictive legal framework has been introduced, including stricter political control locally. CSO practices have returned in several ways to pre-democracy forms, reflecting the development at the centre. For a certain set of CSOs, in certain sectors, the increased national ownership creates an environment that is workable (or even conducive), and for the moment there seems to be no interest in pushing towards stronger local participation (or awareness of the need to do so) from either side. However, we must not forget that this investigation targets organizations which have remained in place locally and found a working formula.

Some segments of civil society (those complying with the government's policies and in non-controversial sectors) are thriving, whereas others (those trying to maintain an independent stance) are being curtailed in their participatory ambition and finding it hard to work locally (and some have already left or reduced their activities). Participatory development activities are pursued with some success in certain sectors, especially non-political and development-oriented ones. (In our sample that would typically be mediation over petty land issues, work against alcohol abuse, and work for local female entrepreneurship). Villagers seem to—according to our interviewees—appreciate these activities, although 'participation' is more of a headcount than organic, and more of a co-operation between stakeholders than implying grassroots involvement. Development workers are selected from above rather than elected from below. CSOs continue to work locally, but participation is 'defensive', meaning that ordinary people are included in the activities but not

in defining or driving them; some are thriving from some activities, but they are not co-constituting them through any tangible bottom-up process.

5   Reflections and conclusions

So, what can we say about the nature and role of local participation in situations of strong national ownership?

In Rwandan policy formulation, local participation is, and has for decades been, very present. Throughout official documents, its importance is articulately declared, and, not least through decentralization, HGS, and civil society endorsement, participatory practices are promoted. Our empirical findings show that CSO representatives are familiar with and favourable towards local participation, while the practices encountered are limited to the sort of participation that helps to increase individual or local relevance. As CSO activities are also closely aligned with government policies, participants are made to work in line with those. Local participation is thus eloquently presented as part of the Rwandan development model, and participation practices are made active use of to serve the implementation of national policies and the reaching of national goals.

In Cambodia, meanwhile, local participation was for much longer driven by aid providers. Initially mainly accepted, it was later gradually and partly taken over and pursued by the government. With shrinking aid dependency, enhanced capacity, and authoritarian rule, however, there is less room for the realization of ideals nurtured by the international development community. Our empirics show that CSOs hold participation in high regard, but also that the perception of the term is very broad. Most development activities are tolerated by the government as long as they comply with the strict regulatory framework and are not politically challenging. As a result, the sort of participation entailed is limited to 'defensive' approaches such as inclusion of villagers in activities, co-operation with local authorities, and broad-based awareness-building. Since the government does not take any interest in or engage with local participation, there is currently not much role for it in the Cambodian development model.

The two countries' different approaches to local participation partly reflect their different approaches to national ownership. Rwandan ownership is the result of a determined policy to claim policy independence, and of active and firm management of aid providers, with the government skilfully navigating the aid arena and exploiting prevailing ideals. Cambodian ownership is more due to a striving for sovereignty and high growth rates and a conscious strategy to attract aid from non-traditional donors with partly different rationales and values. So, we have national ownership for different reasons and exercised in different manners, and we have different ways of relating to local participation. In both cases, however, prevailing participation practices fall short of the emancipatory and empowering forms originally envisioned and supposedly nurtured by the international aid community.

Our findings thus show that national ownership is not per se conducive to local participation. In situations of strong national ownership, it cannot be assumed that policy-makers will adhere to the ideal or promote a certain kind of participatory practice. Rather, if a country's development model, priorities, and strategies are determined domestically—in line with national ownership—it cannot be predicted what that model, those priorities and strategies, will look like. Whether local participation will be valued and promoted and, if so, what sort of participation and for what purposes, will inevitably depend on what value and role national policy-makers see for it.

While this may seem obvious, an explanation for the common assumption that national ownership goes hand in hand with local participation may be an implicit belief within the aid community that democracy prevails, or is emerging, in recipient countries. In 2005, when the ownership agenda was made explicit, democracy was the only game in town. The 'end of history' (Fukuyama 1992) had been touted, reflecting the notion that liberal democracy had 'won' and that there was no going back. If that were the case, national ownership could very well be conducive to local participation—based on the expectation that when an aid recipient government gains ownership, it will adhere to the ideal of local participation, endorsing and 'owning' participatory practices. However, the zeitgeist has drastically changed in at least two ways. The third wave of global democratization has been halted and the global geopolitical context has altered, undermining the hegemony of Western-style aid. In the absence of democracy, popular influence will not be favoured by those in power—and accordingly, there will be a complex relationship between national ownership and local participation.

In practice, and as noted in the introduction, strong national ownership has often come to coincide with centrally controlled policy-making. While this is a convenient state of affairs for the aid community, providing predictability and clarity, in some cases the ownership agenda—aimed at countering legacies of colonialism and oppression by shifting the power balance between those who receive and those who provide aid resources—may even have contributed to such centralization. This is the case because centralization facilitates, for example, strong government leadership, a clear development vision and priorities, a coherent policy framework linked to budget, and co-ordination of aid providers. Our cases illustrate that the principle of national ownership at least allows space for centralized governance, which is likely to have negative, though highly disparate, effects on local participation, depending on central policy-makers' inclinations.

So, if national ownership—in terms of the development agenda being domestically determined—is the overarching aim, centrally controlled policy- and decision-making in aid recipient countries is a possible, perhaps expected, consequence. If, on the other hand, domestic democracy or democratization is a priority, the declared principles need to be revised. The widening of the ownership concept—with pleas for deeper, democratic, substantive, inclusive, balanced, shared, multi-stakeholder, and broad-based forms of ownership (Hasselskog 2020: O98)—has not solved the problem. Such a combination of different—and, as this paper illustrates, contradictory—ideals makes the principle, though appealing and easy to agree on, even less operationable. With continuous widening of the concept also comes a familiar sense of gradual manipulation—there should not only be ownership, but ownership with certain characteristics.

A possible way forward could instead be to more explicitly scrutinize and establish prevailing motives and rationales among aid providers. Why are resources provided, what kind of influence is expected/required, what influence is reasonable, and—not least—what accountabilities to whom come with such influence? This would entail a long way to go from the common focus on recipients. A renewed focus on the provider side, however, might have a chance of revitalizing current and future forms of international development co-operation, making it more clear what it can—and cannot—achieve, in whose interests, based on whose responsibilities, and on what terms.

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