

Mapping the Social Foundations of Development: Community Support Networks, Networked Capital, and Youth Participation in Modern Cambodia

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Abstract

This study examines the role of social capital and community support networks as catalysts of Cambodia's development progress. Drawing on theoretical contributions from Coleman, Putnam, Bourdieu, Fukuyama, Woolcock, and Dasgupta, the paper analyses how bonding, bridging, and linking social capital contribute to cooperation, resilience, and inclusive development. Cambodia provides a compelling context, characterized by strong cultural traditions of solidarity, Buddhist moral values, and vibrant community-based organizations. The study applies a conceptual framework that links social capital to community support networks, cross-organizational collective action, and development outcomes and illustrates the impact of community savings groups, agricultural cooperatives, rural development committees, and youth and women's associations on enhanced livelihoods, governance, and resource management. Findings indicate that social capital is an important constituent element of the enabling environment for economic empowerment, social protection, active citizenship, and community resilience. The paper asserts that deepening community networks can advance Cambodia's sustainable and inclusive development while strengthening the country's cultural assets of trust, cooperation, and a sense of collective identity.

Keywords: Cambodia; Social capital; community support networks; youth leadership; collective action; governance; resilience

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the early 2000s Cambodia has experienced some of the fastest socio-economic transformation in Southeast Asia. Scholars Hughes and Un (2011) argue that in the last two decades Cambodia has experienced a drastic improvement in the developmental landscape of the country regarding physical infrastructure, educational attainment, health services and governance capacity. Likewise, Brickell et al. (2018) describe the country's improved road networks, electrification, and telecommunications as major contributors to the integration of rural communities into the national markets and the improvement of local economic growth and mobility of households within the country's urban centres.

The changes taking place in Cambodia must be placed in the context of its complicated history. From the early 2000s, Cambodia started its reconstruction after decades of war and instability. There was optimism in the air. Slocomb (2010) captured this period, noting that the country had moved from rehabilitation to long-term development planning, signifying a shift toward modernization and consolidation of the state. Similarly, Ear (2012) argues that the

successful transition from the country's reception of emergency aid to its reception of development aid, enabled state and community actors to devise, and implement, growth-oriented, proactive strategies that put the emphasis on social service provision and institutional restructuring.

Cambodia's growing development has prompted scholars to recognize the evolution of certain non-material facets and their impact on development outcomes differently. An emerging perspective focuses on social capital as a growing resource for sustainable development, defined as trust, reciprocity, common expectations, and social cooperation. For Putnam (2000), the ability to understand any development strictly from economic indicators is a gross miscalculation, as social cohesion and civic actions are paramount in transforming the capability of a community and the wealth of a nation. Trust, as highlighted in Fukuyama (2018), is a vital lubricant for any economic activity, as it lowers the cost of transactions and motivates people to work together. These arguments in support of development have taken scholarly attention to the community and recognized the relationships and support systems at that level as vital for development.

The rich history of community engagement and grassroots mobilization in Cambodia is strongly rooted in the consolidation of community support, the Buddhist moral framework, and the grassroots mobilization. Ledgerwood (2012) notes that the Metta (loving-kindness), karuna (compassion), and Samaki (solidarity) principles of Buddhism, that foster the Cambodian social life, encourage community support and responsibility. Ebihara's (2018) ethnographic studies illustrate that the Cambodian rural social community draws on and utilizes social informal systems, including the pagoda, the village elder, and the kinship reciprocal labour exchange groups, to solve problems and to sustain their livelihoods. This rich cultural history makes Cambodia a leading nation for researching the role and the impact the social capital has in facilitating social and economic development (Huot, 2025c).

Different theorists have helped shape the social capital concept, approaching the phenomenon from different disciplines. From this perspective, trust is the building block of social capital, as it allows people and institutions to work together. In economically and politically developed countries where

trust is widely spread, the cost of social transactions and the level of social engineering are lower (Fukuyama, 1995). In contrast, Putnam (1994, 2000) views social capital as the outcome of civic participation, social association, and shared values and believes that the level of social cooperation, social responsibility, and participation in democracy is higher in communities with rich social association networks.

Woolcock (1998) offers, arguably, one of the most relevant models of social capital, describing multiple levels of social capital, and bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. In his description of social capital, bonding social capital refers to close ties with, and within, homogeneous groups, bridging social capital refers to ties across different social groups, and linking social capital refers to ties with institutions and authorities. Woolcock (1998) argues that all three types of social capital are needed to achieve inclusive and sustainable development. Dasgupta (2000) adds to this, describing social capital and institutional quality, reciprocity and cooperation. Dasgupta (2000) argues that social capital increases trust in institutions and helps

individuals align their efforts towards a common goal.

Over the last twenty years, there have been important changes to global development approaches. Scholars like Sen (2015) and Stiglitz (2015) argue that the world has shifted from purely economic growth models to integrated frameworks that incorporate human capacity, governance and social cohesion. In these paradigms, social capital has been recognized as a critical constituent, with some scholars claiming that trust and networks are vital for achieving resilient and inclusive development. In rapidly transforming developing economies, social capital is key to balancing structural social changes, reducing risks, and enhancing civic engagement (Huot, 2025d; Uphoff, 2000).

Social capital has gained prominence as an important construct, particularly with the theoretical developments within the understanding of the processes of development. Its use, however, as several authors note (Cleaver, 2017; Woolcock, 1998), remains patchy, particularly in Southeast Asia. This highlights the need for more context-sensitive inquiries on the social capital phenomenon, particularly how it is

embedded, articulated, and mobilized within social structures as in Cambodia. In Cambodia, for example, social cooperation and collective action as an organizing principle of community life have been documented for a long time (Huot, 2025b; Schröder & Young, 2019). Managing agricultural labour, ceremonial duties, and every day socio-economic tasks, in both urban and rural settings, Kim et al. (2011) and Len and Sokphea (2021) note, is a cooperative informal activity. The village is regarded as the most important social organizing unit, where a culture of trust, reciprocity, and mutual assistance is fostered.

The role of settled social structures in maintaining community cohesion is exemplified by pagodas as religious and community centres for organizing decision-making, resource mobilization, and community social support (Harris, 2017; Huot, 2025c). Village elders as moral leaders and mediators of conflict also support social cohesion and guide collaborative problem solving. Community support reciprocity and resource pooling as collaborative. This foundational social unit is exemplified by solidarity groups or *Krom Samaki*. *Provas Dai* or mutual help in farming and other

agricultural work also point to the level of collaboration within the Cambodian culture (Huot, 2025d).

In recent years, NGOs and community-based organizations have increasingly focused on rural development, public service delivery, and local governance. Coventry (2016) recognizes that NGOs foster community capacity and advocacy, particularly in the health, education, and livelihood sectors. The role of local government in participatory planning has changed because of the local government reforms that emphasize community active involvement in local development (Un, 2005). Cambodia has made economic headway, along with social development and poverty reduction. Yet how the communities' support systems impact the development of the nation, through the fostering of trust and cooperation, has not been described. This gap has been noted, for example, as Jacobs et al. (2020) point out, development research focuses on the managerial aspects of development and neglects community social processes.

The objectives of the study are as follows: (1) to understand the mechanisms of social capital within Cambodian

communities; (2) to assess the role of community support networks in socio-economic development; (3) to evaluate the role of bonding, bridging and linking social capital in community development; and (4) to map the pathways of social capital as means of inclusive and sustainable development.

This study attempts to address the following research questions; (1) How many social capital types exist within the Cambodian community? (2) How do community support networks affect the development momentum of Cambodia? (3) How does the social variable of trust affect the governance structure, the cooperative collective action, and the way people work together? (4) How and through which means, the social capital of the community, facilitate and drive sustainable development? (5) In which ways can Cambodia optimize the social capital of society to achieve development in the future?

II. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Defining Social Capital

The idea of social capital is one of the most recognized and most controversial concepts in social science. Within the social

sciences, i.e., sociology, political science, anthropology, and development economics, social capital has been defined by many authors in different ways. Coleman (1988), arguably one of the first social capital theorists, states that social capital is the social structure of obligations, expectations, and turn-taking, and the trust that underlies social relations, and that make possible a certain type of collective action. He states that, by virtue of the system, and the structures of social relations, individuals receive certain benefits, in turn, the social structures and the system of social relations foster a certain norm of social cooperation.

Coleman's (1988) theory represents the rational choice perspective, in that social capital is a possession of individuals that they can use for a given social purpose. Robert Putnam's work has perhaps become the most influential in sociology. Putnam (1994, 2000) defines social capital as the connections among individuals, social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. Putnam (2000), unlike Coleman (1988), takes social capital to the macro level and discusses its impact on democracy, civic engagement, and institutional performance. He purports that

economically advanced communities, with higher levels of civic participation, exhibit better and effective institutional performance.

Bourdieu (1986) offers yet another definition of social capital from a critical sociological perspective. For him, social capital is defined as the aggregate of the actual or potential resources that accrue to a person via a network of relationships. In this account, the power and class dimensions of social capital, as well as the social reproduction of capital, are emphasized. He expresses social capital's inequitable distribution and how it reinforces social stratification. Unlike Putnam's (2000) communitarian perspective, Bourdieu (1986) also describes how elites acquire and use social capital to further entrench social inequality. From a political-economy viewpoint, Fukuyama (1995, 2001) contends that social capital is primarily based on trust. He argues that trust empowers people to enter social relationships and work collaboratively with one another beyond their family ties. In Fukuyama's (2018) view, socially integrated economies are those that have a high trust culture. He argues that the higher the culture of trust in a society, the more sophisticated

the economic and political systems, and the better the economic outcomes. In Fukuyama's (2018) concept, trust is a social and institutional resource that mitigates risk and helps people to work together.

Scholars analyse both the economic and the sociological definitions of social capital separately. For example, Dasgupta (2000) views social capital as relational structures that decrease transaction costs, risks, and barriers to economic synergies. In contrast, sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists stress the social, cultural, and relational institutions. For example, Woolcock (1998) argues social capital must be both structural, as in networks and associations, and cognitive, in values and norms, which shows the concept's breadth. Most contemporary scholars have a consensus that social capital consists of these three dimensions:

1. Structural Social Capital: This dimension is characterized by the social relations, organizational structures, and network patterns that can be seen and described. Uphoff (2000) argues that structural social capital shows in social memberships in associations,

cooperatives, and committees, as well as in other formal and informal groups. Such structures promote the smooth flow of information, the exchange of resources, and the articulation of collaborative actions.

2. Relational Social Capital: In contrast, this dimension is about the social relations, the trust, the reciprocity, the social obligations, and the inter-personal debts, which are all called social credits. Granovetter (1985) argues that social relations shape economic transactions and that trust and reciprocity are key tokens that facilitate the transactions.

3. Cognitive Social Capital: This type includes the common understanding, in the form of shared beliefs, values, culture, and collective identities, that guides social actions. In this sense, Krishna (2002) believes that cognitive social capital influences the perception of social cooperation and, hence, the willingness to act collectively.

In the case of Cambodia, these dimensions are culturally and religiously embedded. Cambodian scholars such as Ebihara (2018) and Ledgerwood (2012) note that Cambodian

Tver Bun, religious festivals, and the pagoda, as community life, all perpetuate these shared identities and trust within community. The pagoda as the centre community institution for community mobilization, moral guidance, and collective decision making, demonstrates the significance of cognitive and relational social capital (Huot, 2025c, 2025d). The traditional social Cambodian structural capital of mutual aid is described in the practices of labour exchange in the farming season.

2.2. The Three Distinct Types of Social Capital

In social capital literature, drawing from Szreter and Woolcock's (2004) and Woolcock's (1998, 2001) typologies, the three types of social capital are described as bonding, bridging, and linking. The different types play unique roles in the social, economic, and political spheres.

Bonding social capital describes strong social ties within groups of people with similar demographic or socio-cultural characteristics, such as family, neighbours, close friends, or other kinship groups. Members of such groups are likely to offer emotional support and help each other out

(Huot, 2025d; Putnam, 2000), and offer help to one another, though they may be biased toward their group and not help others. In Cambodia, bonding social capital is illustrated by social ties of kinship, networks of extended family and village solidarity. In rural areas, the practice of provision, or mutual labour exchange, is a classic example of bonding social capital. Other examples of bonding social capital include the village funeral associations, savings groups, and labour-sharing arrangements.

Bridging social capital describes the networks that link people or groups that are positioned on different social layers or standpoints. According to Woolcock (1998), they may promote integration and the inclusiveness of new opportunities, new information, and new resources. In Cambodia, bridging social capital is illustrated by inter-village agricultural networks, partnerships between NGOs and communities, cooperatives, and youth associations that bring people together from different geographical or socio-economic levels. Bridging networks are also the agricultural cooperatives, which are very important and which incorporate farmers

from various villages to work together as a single entity for production and marketing.

Linking social capital involves relationships with people and organizations in positions of power and formal authority. For Szreter and Woolcock (2004), linking social capital is important for the acquisition of public funds, state-sponsored initiatives, and other forms of tech support. In the Cambodian context, linking social capital is manifested in relations with commune councils, district level bureaucrats, ministries, and other operational development partners (Huot, 2025b). Linking relations, for example, with intermediary or supporting institutions, are important for community forest committees, farmer water-user groups, and local volunteer groups to obtain funds and training support.

2.3 Community Support Networks in Development Literature

Community support networks are the tangible manifestations of social capital within communities. There is consensus among scholars that these networks play multiple roles that are important for people's wellbeing and community development. The first is the sharing of information.

Granovetter (1973) illustrates that weak ties can provide access to information that is inaccessible to strong ties.

In the context of development, community networks provide information on agricultural practices, market information, government initiatives, and emergencies. The second is the mutual aid and social protection that form the backbone of community support networks. De Weerd (2010) notes that informal support networks often function as social safety nets for the working poor. In Cambodia, informal mutual aid groups, pagoda committees, and women's self-help groups provide social protection to the poor. The third is the joint action, which is a hallmark of community networks. Olson (1965) argues that in the absence of social capital, there is often a collective action problem because of the lack of a common goal. In Cambodia, community collective action is manifested in village clean up, repair works and maintenance of irrigation systems, collective religious celebrations, and community managed forests. The last is the enhancement of crisis response that community networks provide. Aldrich (2012) argues that communities that have developed

networks within themselves are able to bounce back from shocks more effectively.

2.4 Social Capital and Development Outcomes

The links between social capital and development have been deeply analysed. There are multiple ways to understand the links, starting with the idea that trust diminishes the costs associated with transactions. Fukuyama (1995) defends the idea that trust eliminates the need for monitoring and enforcement, leading to more fluid transactions. In Cambodian marketplaces, trust between farmers, traders, and local administrators' supports informal credit and stable exchange. Networks enhance access to resources, which is the second pathway. Woolcock and Narayan (2000) argue that social networks channel the flow of resources, including money, agricultural inputs, and information about markets. In rural Cambodia, where there are no formal institutions, this is especially important. The third pathway relates cohesion to the willingness to collaborate. Communities with cohesive norms are more likely to cooperate voluntarily, according to

Putnam (2000), and this is likely to lead to successful development projects.

Finally, there are links between collective action and community-driven development. Ostrom (1990) demonstrated how communities can successfully manage common resources through collective action. In this regard, Cambodian farmer water-user groups and community forest organizations are good examples. These systems are closely entangled with the formation of human capital, social protection mechanisms, and governance reforms. Social capital, as Huot (2025d) illustrate, bolsters local governance and fosters transparency, participation, and accountability. Therefore, social capital is not an actor in isolation but is entangled with more comprehensive development processes. The conceptual framework for this study revolves around three core elements:

- **Inputs:** The building blocks are trust, reciprocity, shared norms, and cultural values. The traditions of the Cambodian culture are a rich source of cognitive and relational social capital.
- **Mechanisms:** These are cooperation, peer pressure, collective choice, and the mobilization of networks. Mechanisms

function through bonding, bridging, and linking networks.

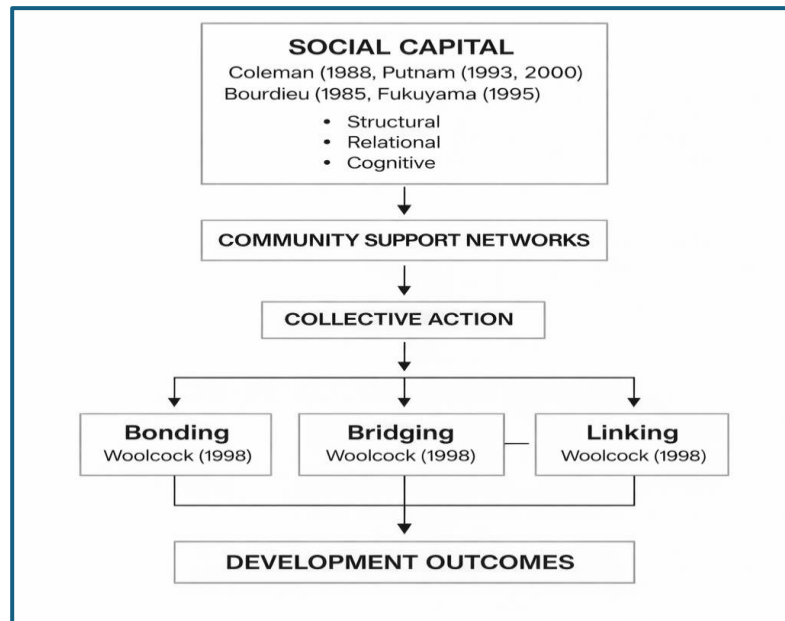
- **Outcomes:** The above-mentioned mechanisms yield positive development outcomes: improved livelihoods, governance, social cohesion, and community resilience.

Cambodia’s Development landscape fits the theories of social capital very well. The Buddhist moral values of compassion, generosity, and solidarity, resonate well with the relational and cognitive of social capital. Consequently, this cultural aspect sustained community participation in the agricultural development, religious life, and social cooperation for many centuries (Jewett et al.,

2021). The Rectangular Strategy IV and Cambodia Sustainable Development Goals (CSDGs) focus on governance, rural development and community engagement, and inclusion. These strategies align with the definition of social capital.

In the context of Cambodia, communities have been historically interdependent, utilizing collective work, village leadership, and mutual support to navigate the cycles of agriculture and respond to crises. As Bennett (2018) shows, these traditions still shape modern community organization, and social capital is still present and crucial for the development practices of Cambodia.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Linking Social Capital, Community Support Networks, and Development Outcomes



III. CAMBODIA'S DEVELOPMENT PROGRESS AND ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

3.1 Cambodia's Economic Growth Trajectory

In Cambodia, the economic landscape has seen significant transformation since the early 2000s, moving from a low-income post-conflict society, to one of the fastest growing economies in Southeast Asia. Numerous scholars recognize this economic transformation as both considerable and sustainable. For example, Hughes and Un (2011) assert that, economic growth in Cambodia post-2000 represents a breakaway from the previously fragile and stagnant growth periods, as the economy recorded average growth of over seven percent in two decades. Similarly, the World Bank (2021) noted that this phenomenal economic growth was because of robust export growth, consistent investment inflows, and increasing economic diversification.

The growing sector diversification epitomizes Cambodia's development. While agriculture historically dominated the economy, the contribution of the sector began to transform as the contribution of the other

emerging sectors began to grow. Although agriculture continues to be important and employs a significant proportion of the population in Cambodia, the sector has economically improved rural area through commercial farming and the adoption of new farming technologies (Cosslett & Cosslett, 2017; Huot, 2025a). Another important sector that has emerged is tourism. In this regard, Winter (2007) explains that the cultural heritage sector, and Angkor Wat in particular, have made Cambodia a world tourism hotspot.

Garment manufacturing is still one of the most important parts of Cambodia's export economy and is a process that started its rapid expansion in the late 1990s. Ear (2007) asserts that the garment industry has a dual purpose: it is responsible for the employment of a large number of women and it has helped Cambodia develop and integrate into the global economy. Cambodia's expanding services also include finance, telecoms, and transportation. The establishment of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) has helped this expansion and made the economy more resilient. In Khien and Lyne's (2019) view, MSMEs form the most important part of

Cambodia's economic diversification in rural and especially peri-urban areas.

The national economic growth Cambodia experienced was matched by reform in its rural areas. Agricultural investments in rural areas, including more effective rural roads, improved agricultural extension services, and investments in irrigation, have all supported rural growth. Cook et al. (2024) argue that rural economies have moved from subsistence and the farming systems of rural households towards more commercial-focused enterprises that engage more directly with the market economy.

3.2 Escalation of Poverty Levels and Development in Human Capital

As Cambodia's economy grew, the country was able to reduce poverty and improve human development. From 2004 to 2014, the country was able to reduce poverty at one of the fastest rates in the world. Poverty rates declined, according to Seng (2018), from fifty-three percent in 2004 to thirteen-point-five percent in 2014, a remarkable achievement in one of the world's fastest changing economies. As noted in the Asian Development Bank

(2023), most of the poverty reduction happened in the countryside, where agricultural development and rural non-farm employment contributed to the poverty alleviation.

The development of human capital was a function of the education system and the country's investments in human development. There was a significant increase in literacy and an improvement in teacher training across the country. UNICEF Cambodia (2019) noted improvements in enrollment in primary and secondary education and attributed these improvements to increased government spending and support from development partners, as well as schooling incentive programs. Healthcare has also developed a great deal. Grundy et al. (2009) note that gradual strengthening of Cambodia's health system has been evident through improvements in rural health centers, midwife training, and community health. Cambodia has also made improvements in nutrition, though some disparities remain. UNICEF (2021) credits community health programs and broadens coverage of immunizations for improvements in maternal health and reductions of child stunting. Improvements in nutrition and health also

positively affect individual's quality of life and increase social mobility. Jacobs et al. (2020) state that human development improvements have created a positive cycle of community engagement and local self-empowerment, further improving development in multiple dimensions.

3.3 Governance and Institutional Reforms

The governance landscape of Cambodia has changed significantly, especially with the introduction of the Commune or Sangkat Council system in 2002. This system was the first instance of decentralized local governance in Cambodia and provided more avenues for citizen participation in local governance. According to Pellini (2007), with the introduction of decentralization policies in Cambodia, the focus shifted to developing local governance structures, fostering community participation, and prioritizing community needs in local development processes.

In the last 20 years, the increase in the number of civil society organizations (CSOs), community groups, and local associations has stimulated community participation in Cambodia. According to Coventry (2016), the continuous emergence

of community groups in Cambodia, even in a challenging political context, is a remarkable development in the country since the 1990s. Community groups comprise youth clubs, women's associations, religious groups, agricultural cooperatives, and local volunteer associations. Hughes (2022) states that community involvement in the local development planning process has been fostered by the presence of developed structures in the form of village development committees and commune development councils. These structures enable partnerships among the people, local government leaders, and development collaborators. In addition, women and youth have become more engaged in community work. Studies show that women's groups often spearhead savings schemes, small enterprise development, and community health initiatives (Ayako, 2013).

According to Jewett et al. (2021), the development of cash-transfer schemes, social health insurance, and community-based social assistance programs have built household resilience and reduced vulnerabilities. These efforts support inclusive development by boosting households. The integration of national

policies and community-driven development is exemplified in the collaboration of local associations, farmer cooperatives, and community forest networks. According to Cook et al. (2024), the government's constructive engagement with communities demonstrates recognition as essential in rural development, the sustainable management of forests, and the alleviation of poverty.

IV. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN CAMBODIA'S DEVELOPMENT

4.1 Bonding Social Capital in Community Life

When family members, neighbors, clans, or members of a village network build a close-knit group, a strong tie is referred to as bonding social capital. According to Putnam (2000), such strong authentic group social connections result in emotional support, mutual trust, and dependable social obligations. In Cambodia, bonding social capital is vital because family networks function as main safety nets. Additionally, village-level unity reinforces bonding ties. In Cambodian moral communities, village cohesion is historically and culturally a moral community because of unity in shared responsibilities (Ebihara, 2018; Huot,

2025c). In planting and harvesting seasons, community members participate in collective labor to lighten the agricultural burdens of the households. This community activity not only increases agricultural output but also the social cohesion of the community (Cook et al., 2024).

The deepening of bonding social capital is also exemplified by religious rituals and community events. Pagodas are hubs of religious festivities, as well as the sites of interment services, weddings, community-making rituals (bon), and community gatherings. According to Harris (2017), the presence of Buddhist community members in a ritual does not merely reflect a participant's spirituality. Rather, it is a manifestation of community trust, reliance on one another and a sense of community. Relational and community ties, social responsibility, and social order are realized through participation in community events. They reinforce cognitive social capital. Consequently, the emotional and cultural ties, together with bonding social capital, create the basis for other social relations (Huot, 2025d). Moreover, it facilitates local governance and collective action. Intracommunity trust strengthens the community's ability to

undertake collective activities, like road repairs, water systems maintenance, and building the temple (Huot, 2025c).

Networks that span different social, economic, or geographical strata are referred to as bridging social capital. According to Woolcock (1998), bridging ties provide diverse opportunities, and improve the flow of information and creativity, because of association with different individuals. In Cambodia, the collaboration of different villages, cross-commune partnerships and cooperatives, exemplifies the gift of bridging social capital. With increased mobility, education, and communication, the networks between villages have become more pronounced. Youth and women's groups often go beyond the locality, making it possible to learn and solve problems collaboratively (Ayako, 2013). Such collaborations increase the exposure of rural populations to varied ideas and practices, thereby improving the adaptability of rural populations to the changing socio-economic environment. According to Cosslett and Cosslett (2017), cooperatives improve economic resilience and bargaining power of members through the pooling of risks and

resources. Another vital bridge mechanism is partnership with NGOs.

4.2 Linking Social Capital and Institutional Trust

Linking social capital is defined as the connections that communities have with people of authority and the decision-making power within an institution. According to Szreter and Woolcock (2004), without these types of connections, communities cannot gain access to the political and economic resources and assistance that an institution offers. In Cambodia, linking social capital, in the form of community and government partnerships, has been increasingly influencing the development process, particularly after the introduction of decentralization.

Trust between local authorities is a primary element of linking social capital. Commune and district officials are brokers who mobilize local resources for community initiatives, such as the rehabilitation of irrigation systems, construction of schools, and improvements to rural roads. According to Pellini (2007), communities with greater trust in local leaders are more likely to engage in development planning, voice their issues,

and partnership in decision-making. Such trust bolsters the effectiveness of governance and reinforces accountability.

Support from institutional networks can also be resource. Community forest committees, farmer water-user groups, and disaster management committees collaborate with ministries, provincial departments, and

development agencies. These relationships enhance their access to opportunities such as technical training, agricultural inputs, or social protection. According to Diepart and Oeur (2023), rural communities that have linking social capital could interact with formal institutions to greater extent, as depicted in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Cambodia’s Development Progress

Category	Sub-Components	Key Insights
Economic Growth	GDP Growth; Sector Diversification; Rural Transformation	Consistent growth since 2000; expansion in garments, tourism, construction; improved rural productivity.
Poverty Reduction	Income Poverty; Education Gains; Health Improvements	Sharp decline in poverty; rising literacy; improved maternal and child health; expanded access to services.
Governance Reforms	Decentralization; Local Participation; Transparency Mechanisms	Commune reforms since 2002; citizen engagement in planning; stronger accountability channels.
Community Engagement	CSOs; Community Groups; Cooperatives	Growth of NGOs and local associations; enhanced community roles in development activities.
Policy Alignment	Rectangular Strategy IV; CSDGs; Social Protection	National policies emphasize rural development, resilience, inclusive growth; strengthened social protection systems.

4.3 Trust Sits at the Heart of Collective Action

Trust is the base-building block of social capital. According to Fukuyama (1995), the presence of trust means that there is no need for formal enforcement. This means there are fewer social interactions that are costly. Trust in Cambodia is seen as a social cooperation lubricant.

Trust is one of the fundamental ingredients of social cooperation. Trust in Un (2005) explains that through social cooperation and faith at the inter-religious levels, various dialogues and negotiations can be achieved to solve a problem. This method can be used to resolve a conflict in a situation that is likely to escalate.

Trust is crucial in all social activities. Villagers exercise greater social cooperation in labour networks, economic resource-sharing, and collaborative social construction activities such as the building of communal bridges and the clearing of village public goods. The exercise of social cooperation is heavily dependent on trust of social predictability. Trust is the central social control mechanism between the citizens and the government. Eng and Ear (2016) show that communities that trust their institutions

have better social cooperation because there are no tensions during negotiations.

Social cohesion refers to the level of attachment that community members have towards one another and the extent to which they possess shared values and peaceful relationships. The culture, history and social norms of Cambodia greatly foster social cohesion which in turn strengthens community resilience. The role of social cohesion is exemplified in collective action in times of disasters. In Cambodia, that floods, droughts and climate change disasters are commonplace. Communities with integrated social networks recover from disasters quickly (Aldrich, 2012). This is true for Cambodian villages. In times of floods, people help by rescuing children, moving those who are at risk to safety, sharing food, and helping to repair destroyed homes. All these acts of cooperation enhance community resilience and reduces risk.

Social cohesion is also significant when there are disruptions in the economy. The COVID-19 pandemic created an economic disruption and a split in the wages of workers. During this period, informal support networks like food sharing, and delays in debt collection, and gift giving

among community members were important mechanisms to help cope with increased prices and financial hardships (Jewett et al., 2021). This shows the role of support networks in protecting the community from economic shocks.

Most times out of a crisis, people use informal safeguarding mechanisms to protect vulnerable households. Networks in the neighbourhood, committees at the pagoda, and women’s assistance groups are places where elders, widows, and disabled people, along with orphans, seek help. No Cambodian household, as Ledgerwood

(2012) notes, can call itself socially unintegrated because social life in Cambodia entails intertwined social relations that are mutually supportive. Collective identity is a byproduct of such social integration. The participatory sense of community is strengthened by festivals, and ceremony, or the activities of some religion, and it ties together a community (Huot, 2025c). Cohesion, in turn, facilitates the collaborative spirit deployed in projects of development and can be an asset in the upkeep of calm and order in a community, as seen in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Key Roles of Social Capital in Cambodia’s Development

Social Capital	Key Features	Development Contributions
Bonding	Family networks, kinship ties, village solidarity	Provides safety nets, strengthens mutual aid, supports community rituals
Bridging	Inter-village cooperation, associations, cooperatives	Enhances information flow, increases livelihood options, builds cross-community resilience
Linking	Local authorities, ministries, development partners	Improves institutional trust, allows access to resources and technical support
Trust	Interpersonal trust, institutional trust	Reduces conflict, enables collective action, improves governance outcomes

Social Capital	Key Features	Development Contributions
Social Cohesion	Shared norms, rituals, cultural identity	Strengthens resilience, supports crisis response, maintains community harmony

V. COMMUNITY SUPPORT NETWORKS AS CATALYSTS OF DEVELOPMENT

5.1 Economic Empower Empowerment Through Networks

Community support networks have contributed economically to the development of Cambodia by helping resident support networks enable better community savings. De Weerd (2010) describes how gradings, informal savings groups, improve the financial situations of people in developing countries who are not served by formal banking systems. In Cambodia, these savings groups help people save money, borrow small amounts, and lend support to one another. These groups are important in helping members deal with economic hardships and in reducing dependency on money lenders who charge high interest rates.

Since the early 2010s, Agricultural Cooperatives, supported by NGO intervention and government policy, have grown significantly. Cosslett and Cosslett

(2017) state that agricultural cooperatives improve marketing innovation and increase farmers’ access and reduce marketing risk. Through the cooperatives, members could learn about better agronomic practices, and adopt new technologies, and improve their bargaining position with traders. As a result, these Cooperatives can create Economies of Scale by allowing farmers to bulk buy agricultural inputs, store their harvests and market their produce efficiently.

Community networks also provide support for micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Khieng and Lyne (2019) note the reliance of MSMEs in Cambodia on community-based informal knowledge networks, where entrepreneurs learn from each other about where to price products, which suppliers to work with, and how to reach customers.

Social protection is another area where the impact of community support networks for development is particularly evident. Cambodian communities have relied

on informal networks of support to attend to the needs of the most marginalized, including widows, the elderly, the poor, and people with disabilities. These practices, noted by Ebihara (2018) and Ledgerwood (2012), are shaped by social norms of Buddhism and the values of compassion and reciprocal altruism, where the most marginalized in a community are supported by their neighbours and family.

Networks of support display profound levels of social protection capacity during times of crisis. For example, Aldrich (2012) highlighted how social networks, in some cases, respond and recover better than some government efforts, if at all, during disasters. The phenomenon is well illustrated in Cambodia's recurrent floods and droughts. Villagers in the impacted areas work as a unit to provide shelter, food, and reconstruction of communal facilities, and the informal group adjusts to and relocates the affected. Such networks are robust and, as proven in the 2020 COVID-19 period, react to and assist the impacted within, in most cases, hours of a disaster. In addition, Jewett et al. (2021) documented informal support systems, including food support, family debt forgiveness, and neighbour assistance, which

helped lessen the impacts of the unemployment, education, and school closures during COVID-19.

In Cambodia, rural development networks are one of the most fluid and adaptable means of community assistance. These networks also include committees for community forestry, groups for the extension of agriculture, associations for the protection of the environment, and user groups of water. For example, water-user groups help in the management of irrigation systems and in the scheduling of water distribution to farmers. According to Diepart and Oeur (2023), such groups have an important role in the maintenance of irrigation systems, the management of conflicts in water, and the improvement of productivity in the farming sector. In the last few decades, community forestry networks have expanded as part of the national strategy to control deforestation and conserve resources. Williamson et al. (2022), note that the community forestry groups manage and patrol their own forests and area, and work in partnership with the Ministry of the Environment to manage the resources.

In Cambodia's community support networks, the roles of youth and women have

shifted to being more active. This is especially true in the areas of entrepreneurship, digital innovation, and community leadership. In community settings, women’s groups take the lead on socio-economic activities. According to (Ayako, 2013), women’s networks in Cambodia have been crucial in facilitating the development of microenterprises, financial literacy, and savings groups. These networks offer women the opportunity to situate their experience, combat control, and reinforce their collective control. Women’s roles in health education, child welfare, and household resilience are also vital.

Youth networks are becoming vibrant drivers of innovation and learning. The digital revolution has enabled young Cambodians to participate in online learning

and entrepreneurship, and to be civically active. Many young leaders have driven environmental initiatives, digital literacy seminars, and community social media projects. Rural youth networks partners, Coventry (2016), create new levels of participation and connectivity with peripheral rural and national and global networks. Also central to these networks are skill-building. Local associations provide training in agriculture, business, IT (computer), leadership, and other vocational skills. They build human capital and employability and reduce the prospects of long-term development. Youth and women’s networks are important social change agents, inter-generational and inclusive in their development objectives, as captured in **Table 3**.

Table 3. *Community Support Networks as Catalysts of Development in Cambodia*

Network Type	Key Characteristics	Development Contributions
Community Savings Groups	Rotating savings, mutual financial support, local lending practices	Enhance financial resilience, reduce reliance on high-interest loans, support small enterprises

Network Type		Key Characteristics	Development Contributions
Agricultural Cooperatives		Shared production, collective marketing, resource pooling	Improve market access, enable innovation, increase bargaining power
Informal Networks	Support	Family aid, neighbour assistance, reciprocity norms	Provide social protection for widows, elderly, poor households during daily hardships
Community Governance Networks		Village committees, planning groups, monitoring teams	Strengthen participation, improve project accountability, align development with community needs
Rural Networks	Development	Water-user community extension committees	Promote sustainable resource management, improve agricultural productivity, enhance resilience

VI. CONCLUSION

The study showed the importance of social capital and community support networks in driving Cambodia’s societal development. Across the different regions of Cambodia’s economy, social capital has been an empowering, albeit underappreciated, element of fostering collaboration, resilience, and socio-economic inclusive advancement. Strong family ties, kinship bonds, and village-level togetherness have repeatedly proven to be the main sources of informal

welfare and emotional support, especially to vulnerable households, as exemplified by the bonding social capital. Social bonding capital of bridging character has also significantly improved village interlinkage and community collaboration associations, agricultural cooperatives, and civil partnerships with community support organizations, enhancing the flow of information, resource support, and economic activities. Social capital of bridging and linking character have increased community involvement to local-level governance,

public resource allocation, and local development decision-making.

The three elements of social capital help Cambodia advance economically, socially, and in governance. The synergies of community networks, whether formed around savings groups, cooperatives, rural development committees, or youth and women's associations, empower and galvanize collective action. Such networks strengthen livelihoods and assist in fostering transparent governance, managing and protecting natural resources, and disaster preparedness. Cambodia's development is not only influenced by economic growth or state reforms, but also by the positive interrelations, common values, and communal support of the citizens.

The study provides insights into the elements of social capital that will guide Cambodia's development. Most importantly, social capital is an integral factor in driving sustainable and inclusive growth. Building social cohesion, trust, and cooperation facilitate a more effective development paradigm. The strengthening of social capital will advance both the rural and urban development agendas by improving localized

decision-making and resilient community structures.

Secondly, development policies and programs need to more fully incorporate community-driven frameworks. Community support networks have demonstrated the ability to mobilize and coordinate local resources and collective action, as well as respond to crises, in all the countries of the region. Policies that strengthen these community support networks, for example, support of participatory governance, decentralized planning, and community resource management, are likely to provide the most innovative, effective, and culturally appropriate results. Cambodia's national strategies, including the Rectangular Strategy and the Cambodia Sustainable Development Goals (CSDGs), emphasize community inclusiveness and community focus. These strategies provide frameworks to ensure that development initiatives are community responsive. Finally, the importance of focused support of women's and youth networks should not be under-estimated. These networks are becoming crucial for driving economic innovation, digital literacy, local leadership, and community resilience. Encouraging their leadership and enhancing

the support of skills training, technology, and financial resources will strengthen the social fabric of Cambodia.

The study clearly states that the social capital found in the confederation of the kingdom of Cambodia is embedded in culture, tradition, and community. It is integrated in the daily and routine activities of the people such as in religious activities, in the performing of kinship obligations, and in the collective activities of the community. The positive development of Cambodia, in terms of economic growth, poverty reduction, governance reforms, and increased community participation, has been built on the trust, cooperation, and solidarity community support networks in the country.

On the other hand, social capital will need to be preserved and strengthened as Cambodia continues its journey towards middle-income status and further integrates into the global economy. The social change that has happened in the Kingdom of Cambodia over the years will be guided by the community social networks that are in place. Cambodia will be able to maintain a positive development trajectory as long as it continues to strengthen the social and core foundations of its community.

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