



GDPRD Civil Society Organizations and Aid Effectiveness in Agriculture and Rural Development Applications Initiative

Good practices in CAMBODIA

BACKGROUND

After two decades of playing a largely service delivery role, Cambodian CSOs are increasingly engaging in aid effectiveness (AE), policy influencing and advocacy. This is a challenging area of work in the current Cambodian political context, and civil society is still relatively weak in relation to either the government or donors. In fact, most CSOs, especially small and local CSOs working on agriculture and rural development (ARD), had never participated in AE discussions.

Aid plays an important role in poverty alleviation and economic development in Cambodia. As political and social conditions in the country normalize, emergency assistance and rehabilitation are diverted to support long-term sustainable development. Aid organizations consistently request policy and institutional reform of the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) to ensure the efficient use of international aid for development. Thus through such assistance and budgetary support, the international community is supporting the process of rebuilding civil society and reshaping the market economy in Cambodia.

Moreover, all stakeholders, including the RGC, have agreed that a top development priority for Cambodia is faster economic growth in rural areas, particularly through enhanced agricultural productivity. This is needed to reduce poverty and generate income as the prevalence of poverty is much higher among rural farmers than among other employment groups. It is estimated that 84% of the population and around 90% of the poor live in rural areas, and agricultural activities are their main source of income: the sector employs 70% of the labour force while industry employs 8%.

However, the sector often faces problems of high transport costs, lack of competition among buyers, and a general lack of agro-processing facilities (although this is changing). Efficient agro-processing facilities can add value to farm output and thus permit buyers to offer better prices for farm produce. Inaccessibility because of impassable roads, and a general lack of market information, tends to limit the number of buyers able to buy farm output produced in a particular region and thus keep prices down. Effective solutions thus include directing aid towards improving transport, communication, and farmers' familiarity with the market.

Within the above context, this summary report is the outcome of a national consultation held in Phnom Penh as part of a global initiative to follow up on the 2005 Paris Declaration (PD) agenda. Twenty-eight participants were actively involved in a two-day national consultation and among the participants were five government representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery, the Ministry of Rural Development, and the Ministry of Planning.

FINDINGS

Recognition and voice

AE was a new issue for many participants and had not been considered in their planning. Many participants could only contribute to the group discussions based on their project or program planning

goals in the context of convincing donors to provide funding. Consequently, participants requested more AE discussions in order to accommodate more voices from CSOs and communities. This would result in greater participation in relation to AE and its utilization and monitoring, as the process of AE would be better enforced.

Applying and enriching the international aid effectiveness agenda

Without the support and close cooperation of the RGC from the earliest stage of preparation and throughout the implementation process, participants said, development projects or programs are doomed to fail. Government ownership in Cambodia is critical for success. It is equally important that government ownership involve CSOs. Government must make national policy and planning discussions more widely accessible, and encourage more CSO cooperation. It must be receptive to suggestions from CSOs and communities, be open to scrutiny from Cambodian CSOs and Parliament about their own aid effectiveness, and move faster to improve the quality of aid.

Participants also stressed their lack of knowledge concerning government financial systems and procedures, as they work mostly with local authorities. Their projects and programs are often planned and designed using the same methods as local authorities use when preparing communal development plans. CSO representatives found that they had not thought much about harmonization because their access to government planning of projects and programs was limited.

Almost all participants reported that they had never thought of comparing their development programs or projects with the government's, except at the commune level. Discussions revealed that most CSOs rarely work closely with the government to conduct projects or programs jointly. Individual CSOs monitor and evaluate their own project and program implementation. In fact, the government had never asked them to share their monitoring results or to take part in the monitoring or evaluation process. Due to lack of experience, participants only raised a few points such as conducting normal monitoring, which includes report review, interviews and case studies, and matching project results against plans with the participation of government agencies.

Improved understanding of good practice

CSOs and their primary constituents: The most striking experiences shared among participants were those truly representing the communities, understanding their needs and priorities, being neutral to people and political affiliation, encouraging people to understand goals and objectives of CSOs, and being accountable and transparent. Working with local communities and encouraging local ownership was identified as a positive strategy; participants particularly highlighted this good practice. In addition, it was suggested that all project or program wording and procedures be simple and practical in order to ensure participation from the communities. Local CSOs suggested that donors should consider providing long-term development projects to CSOs as this will further strengthen the confidence of local communities towards local CSOs. The long-term development project is seen by local communities as an answer to their demands and needs, more than just capacity building. However, participants acknowledged that local CSOs need to strengthen their capacity in order to carry out long-term development projects effectively.

Relationships between and among CSOs at the country level and beyond: Networking and cooperation among CSOs serve to address the issue of overlapping activities. However, CSOs require assistance and support in this process, such as capacity building funding for planning and accountability to local communities, CSOs and government, and for establishing effective networking centers. CSO networking exists but it is not always functional due to lack of commitment and funding.

Relationships between Northern and Southern CSOs: The clear distinction between local CSOs and international CSOs (IOs) was mainly in the area of resourcing. Local CSOs receive a much lower level compared to IOs. Moreover, there has been limited contact and relationship between the two. Local CSOs are effective in working at the grassroots level to deliver services to the local communities where international CSOs are not as effective. In particular, local Cambodian CSOs advise that they wish to be

seen as equal partners and not only as recipient partners. In addition, local CSOs resent the fact they hold little power in relation to finance, decision-making and participation in many important discussions, compared to IOs which do not adequately convey local concerns and needs to donors and the international community.

Relationships between CSOs and the Royal Government of Cambodia: Most CSOs have not heard of the Paris Declaration. Their limited access to discussions on government policy formulation, coupled with their limited human resources, leads them to focus on ensuring satisfaction of service delivery to the target population. CSO delivery of services to local communities directly conforms with mutual accountability to the government and to local communities. Often they do not participate in the government monitoring process or invite the government to take part in their own. For instance, CSOs should be more involved in communal planning processes. However, they do share project and program evaluation reports with the government. CSOs expressed a desire to participate more in government planning and in monitoring of government programs. CSOs recognized their human resource limitations in talking to and being heard by government as equals. In order for local CSOs to be able to effectively or fruitfully participate in government planning and monitoring processes, donors should help to strengthen their human resource capacity, especially for those small local CSOs in rural areas.

Relationships between donors and CSOs: CSOs believe that they should have direct access to donors. They have experienced funding cuts which compromise development capacity, particularly if funds are channelled through international CSOs and funding is reduced for budgetary and administrative reasons. Many CSOs, especially small organizations in rural areas, do not have a clear understanding of aid monitoring, beyond the production of internal quarterly or mid-term review reports. Inadequate donor funding is the main reason for not having external audits. Furthermore, donors should not fund development work without also funding CSO staff. Other issues include donor funding for CSO capacity building, flexibility of donor funding to meet community needs, longer funding timeframes, and information on donor programs reaching small CSOs and in the local language. CSOs also must be involved in aid management and utilization through active participation in existing AE mechanisms such as the technical working groups (TWGs), consultative groups and many other CSO networks. Through such mechanisms and networks, CSOs could have their formal say and a voice in policy formulation and implementation.

EMERGING GOOD PRACTICES

There are many AE challenges facing Cambodian CSOs working in ARD. Most CSOs do not think of alignment as stipulated in the PD, but only of achieving their goals in tune with the needs and demands of local communities, or to commune development plans. Harmonization with government systems proves very difficult, as CSOs often do not have access to government information. The government's formal procedures and bureaucratic processes also make it difficult for CSOs to comply. The small and short-term nature of CSO projects and programs also discourages their conforming to government development policy.

Recommendations for advancing the aid effectiveness agenda

Cambodian CSOs need to build up their capacity and to better network amongst themselves so that they can engage in AE. Donors should continue to play a supportive role to local CSOs by providing capacity building in order to enable them to carry out long-term projects which will lead to trust-building with local communities. In turn, CSOs could strengthen their human and technical capacity in order to master their position in negotiating with the government in the long run. For instance, Cambodian CSOs could reduce their focus on donors as a means of influencing the government and lobby for greater space for their own advocacy. In turn, the RGC could be more open to influencing their citizens and CSOs to be more accountable and transparent in the use of resources. However, local CSOs should also continue to be assertive with donors and should hold donors to account for meeting their commitments on aid.

Consequently, donors could further push for spaces for CSO engagement in AE, as has been done with TWGs.

The need to solve overlapping activities among CSOs in the same target communities is critical in Cambodia. According to participants, CSOs need to better explain their mission and goal clearly to their target communities. For example, consultation should be done with local authorities and among CSOs, as is the case in Ratanakiri province, where an NGO Coordination Committee was established for all NGOs to meet and discuss regularly. It was found that organizing community members into small groups and then linking them to large networks is critical and strategic for realizing communities' project/program goals. This approach is also utilized at the NGO network level, where NGOs are organized according to areas of expertise or activity. It is also an excellent way to avoid overlapping activities. This approach is helpful for implementing projects and ensuring sustainability.

With respect to improving AE on donor funding, it was suggested that donors divide aid funds into three kinds of financial support: (1) budgetary support, which is macrofinancial assistance channelled directly to government budgets; (2) sectoral support, which is provided to support ARD programs or projects; and (3) program support, which is provided to individual development players, including CSOs. By establishing clear types of support through aid, CSOs felt they would be better able to design their proposals more effectively and conform to donor guidelines and AE principles.

Donors should be more accountable to the recipient population through their aid assistance. Even though the government is the main party for accountability of aid, donors should bear the same responsibility for AE. Also, further efforts are required from donors to increase the voice of local communities in AE and they should take into account voices raised from the CSOs in regards to meeting commitments to AE.

Lastly, in order to advance AE in relation to ARD in Cambodia, streamlining towards local rural CSOs and communities should be undertaken. This can be done by organizing campaigns in each of the provinces with high numbers of CSOs working in ARD. This should provide access to these CSOs to take part in future AE discussions.

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