Learning for Transformation

A research study conducted by Meas Nee and Moira O'Leary, under the auspices of Krom Akphiwat Phum, sheds light on why development efforts aimed at capacity building have had limited impact on bringing about genuine change, particularly at the village level.*

Research Framework

The following article represents a summary of the findings of an action oriented research project conducted under the auspices of Krom Akphiwat Phum over the period January - August 2001. The research employed a variety of qualitative methodologies and techniques, including structured reflections, in-depth interviews and case studies. A total of 35 staff from 4 Cambodian NGOs participated in the research. Forty three advisors, educators or trainers from 31 different organisations were interviewed.

The primary purpose of this research was to develop an understanding of why the development efforts aimed at capacity building, primarily through training, have not been as effective in fostering genuine change (transformation), particularly at the village level, as could have been expected. What practitioners 'see' and do in their practice depends on their understanding of development. The researchers argue that the aim of development practice should be people's increasing capacity to control their circumstances.

Current development practice is examined within the context of Cambodian culture and the more recent influences of conflict and foreign development interventions. The research showed that practitioners are struggling to accommodate what is culturally and socially acceptable and expected, and the demands of their work, which at least in theory, is calling them to behave in a very different way. Much of this tension is not at a conscious level.

Insights and Conclusions

The research indicated that development is seen primarily in terms of poverty alleviation with current development practice principally aimed at improving economic wellbeing. Resources are provided through projects. This is generally seen to be the purpose of the development intervention. One of the main areas of concern is that the approaches and interventions into situations of injustice are not enabling people to develop their capacities to have greater control over their lives. The tendency to 'do for' rather than 'do with' is more likely to result in creating dependency and maintaining the status quo than in increased confidence and promoting change.

When or if development practitioners are unconscious of the power dynamics in their relationship with villagers, or perceive these to be the norm, they tend to assume that their project activities are participatory and empowering regardless of the actual level of engagement of villagers in decision-making processes and the nature of the relationships formed. Where there is a recognition of the issues of power - that poverty is the result of inequities and unequal distribution of resources and abuses of power - there are strong feelings of apprehension about thinking and moving in this direction.

The social order of Cambodian society, reinforced by some Cambodian understandings of Buddhism, depends upon everyone respecting the social hierarchy and keeping her or his place in it. From childhood, people are taught to obey and respect those with authority. Challenging, questioning, and holding dissenting views are discouraged, conflict is seen as bad and loss of face is to be avoided at all costs. The Cambodian education system has been based on students learning by heart what the teacher taught them, with very little attention being paid to understanding and analysis. Students are given little, if any, opportunity to think independently, to question or use their own initiative. Beliefs about education (and the teaching methods adopted by society) are formative in the development of learning processes, and of attitudes towards learning and knowledge.

The combination of the hierarchical culture, patronage, and the education system has resulted in a widespread reluctance to openly oppose, disagree with or even to question those who have power. This has been exacerbated by people's experience of trauma and authoritarian leadership during war and conflict situations. Living with uncertainty for a prolonged period of time can result in loss of confidence and feelings of powerlessness, lack of trust, fear, passivity and lack of initiative.

Traditional expectations of people who have knowledge, resources and power (high status) is that they should give advice, manage and control. This militates strongly against the handing over of control and decision-making to the less powerful persons, thereby constraining their participation in any meaningful way. On the one hand the powerful assume their right to control, and on the other, the subordinates internalise and accept their powerlessness. This is evident both within organisations and in the way development practitioners conceive of their practice and intervene in the field. The habit of some practitioners to be passive and subservient - which is the expression of lack of power within themselves - has discouraged their efforts and commitment to promote change.

Personal attitudes to the existing power relations between men and women, and traditional gender roles influence how development workers perceive their work in addressing strategic gender issues. Within themselves, development practitioners are grappling with contradic-

* This article is an executive summary of a study of the relationship between culture, values, experience, and development practice in Cambodia titled, *Learning for Transformation.* It is reproduced here with the permission of the authors. The full report can be obtained from Krom Akphiwat Phum and VBNK.

tory views of what is considered 'acceptable'. For example, many are not sure that it is always wrong for a man to hit a woman. Many practitioners are struggling to understand what is meant by gender in the Cambodian context. In addition, 'gender and development' has been distorted to mean virtually anything to do with women.

'Foreign' development influences (capacity building, organisational culture and the expectations of donors) are being laid over the underlying formative influences of culture and trauma and are also impinging on development practitioners' attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of their work. Certain values in Cambodian society such as conformity, respect and obedience, harmony and social stability are important in themselves and for the society. The research explores how newer concepts such as empowerment, participation, gender equity and social justice are understood.

There is apparent tension within NGOs between empowering people so they dare to speak and protest injustice and wanting them not to be so poor and powerless but also not wanting to create conflict or tension and disrupt the social order. Some of the characteristics of patron-client relationships are replicated within development work. Patronage encourages dependence, gratitude and maintenance of unequal relations, whereas participation assumes interdependence and equality. Respectful, trusting relationships between people who are not equals in the social order are difficult for many practitioners to envision.

In discussions with development practitioners regarding acting on or implementing the development values of participation, social justice, empowerment and gender equity - even though all of these values were shown to be encouraging behaviours which are against the cultural norms - it was only gender equity which was widely regarded as being 'against' Cambodian culture and tradition.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as such are foreign to Cambodia. Formal training is but one approach to the building of capacity but it has been a central focus of the efforts of many NGOs in Cambodia. This is reinforced by the expectations of the development practitioners who believe that they need training (inputs) to develop their knowledge and skills. The development of knowledge and skills has been important in building practitioners' understanding and confidence in beginning their development practice. However, training seems to have shied away from paying due attention to the processes and changes in people's lives because (i) these are largely invisible and less tangible (ii) the focus has been on providing the goods and services and helping to meet the recipients' basic needs (outputs) rather than outcomes.

Training courses have focused on the transmission of information, particularly the technical content and have not really challenged the development practitioner to discern their own values and to clarify how they fit in relation to development values. If the training is mainly technical it is not aimed at changing attitudes and perceptions. The 'problem' is particularly apparent in the application of knowledge about gender. Most practitioners have attended training on the theory of gender but the degree of internalisation and commitment varies from no discernible change in attitude or belief, to those who had embraced the concept to some degree.

The common reality in NGOs is hierarchical, autocratic environments with much of the decision-making power resting with the director. Hierarchy, whether in the organisation or in the field, is not conducive to participation or empowerment. It tends to diminish the sense of personal responsibility and self-discipline of staff. For many NGOs there is lack of clarity regarding their core values and these are not then evident in their organisational structures and behaviour.

The power imbalance in the donor-partner relationships is an immediate and direct consequence of the donor having the funds and the right to decide whether or not the 'partner' receives funding, and whether they will continue to receive funding. The imbalance inherent in donor/grantee relationships makes them particularly difficult relationships, even when the donor or support organisation is trying to be supportive and is sensitive to this.

Training courses have focused on the transmission of information, particularly the technical content and have not really challenged the development practitioner to discern their own values and to clarify how they fit in relation to development values.

The question of how we, as development practitioners, can facilitate the development process with others if we do not understand how we ourselves have developed and are developing is crucial. It is suggested that if we ignore the need to change ourselves it is unlikely that we will be able to stimulate change in others. Practitioners tend to regard their own development process as something quite separate to that which they are attempting in the village. However, there is an inseparable link between personal change and social change. If practitioners are not striving to be caring and compassionate in their personal behaviour they are unlikely to work effectively for a caring and compassionate society. Personal development requires a disciplined process of self-reflection and contemplation about the values and purposes of our lives, and the desire and willingness to change ourselves.

The orientation of the practitioner is of primary importance for development practice. What a development practitioner brings to the situation is herself or himself. The skilled practitioner is the instrument of the development process. A practitioner, acting out of a body of knowledge, and self-knowledge - who is conscious and self-confident and takes responsibility for his/her own prejudices and preconceptions - is more likely to be effective in facilitating social change. To listen well to others, to have the capacity to be empathetic, to be focused on creating and maintaining empowering relationships, requires a well-balanced human being.

Development practitioners need to be conscious and

clear about what change is desired, confident and free to respond to situations, open to possibilities, and able 'see' what is there. What is needed is a conscious practice. Practitioners need to work on developing their own theory of practice that is organic and not a set of rules, steps or tools that are to be mechanically followed. Much more discussion and debate is needed among Cambodian development practitioners to achieve clarity about the goal of their interventions and overall efforts.

The necessity to integrate the cultural dimension into development work is apparent. The case studies undertaken by this research demonstrate how culture permeates all aspects of the development practitioner's life. Practitioners need to understand the dynamics and structures of social relationships in rural society and be alert to cultural forces and the reality that hierarchical and patron-client relationships are replicated between development practitioners and villagers, and between the director and the staff in many organisations.

Unless practitioners are liberated from their own fears they will be unlikely to be able to work in liberating ways with others. As the development practitioners themselves become free of fear and dependency and increase in confidence, they become more able to hand over the power and responsibility to the people. In development practice it is constructive if mistakes are seen as opportunities for learning. In order for this to happen, the practitioner must feel free to try new things or to explore new strategies that could respond to the real situation. This is unlikely if the culture of the organisation is such that practitioners feel they will be accused or blamed if they take initiative or if they dare to reveal their mistakes. 'Learning organisations' can only be created when the environment appears safe. A safe environment of trust and cooperation has to be consciously built within an organisation - it does not happen automatically. The value of each person's contribution needs to be acknowledged and celebrated if a team spirit is to develop, along with a shared value that the organisation's efforts can always be improved upon.

Practitioners can use their own experience, through the principles of action-learning to improve their effectiveness. However, this requires that they have the confidence to trust that they can learn from their experience and not from outside experts.

Capacity building practitioners and trainers need to understand more explicitly what the people whose capacity they are endeavouring to strengthen are facing regarding the dilemmas of development practice in Cambodia. They also need to understand the situation of the practitioner in relation to their organisation, otherwise their capacity building efforts may be of very limited value. Capacity builders need to be conscious of the factors - within themselves and within participants - which inhibit the facilitation of learning.

Continued from page 4

Land Transaction...

Conclusion

Despite a number of shortcomings in the data and information analysed here, some tentative conclusions are still permissible. First, land governance has been weak; as a result the number of land plots registered and officially transacted is a small proportion of the total land plots in the country. This has contributed to a lack of regulation over land markets, which is a necessary condition for markets to function efficiently in a free enterprise regime. Second, land markets are very unevenly developed, and there are several forms of land control and transaction that co-exist. This lack of uniformity in the land markets has resulted in more than one 'legal order', and there is a lack of clarity about the correct procedures, rules and jurisdictions. Third, the formal procedures for registering land transactions are more complicated and expensive than informal procedures, thereby excluding the poor and under-privileged from the formal system.

Land transactions, like registrations, are concentrated in the provinces that are more commercially developed. Most buyers are from Phnom Penh. Land transactions rose rapidly in the early 1990s and peaked in 1996 and then began to decline. One reason for this trend is the economic slowdown that began in 1997 in the wake of political instability.

The principal reason for transactions not to involve the cadastral authorities is that the bulk of land parcels are not yet registered. There are also other reasons why land transactions have officially not involved the government. The fact that all *official* transactions require a tax payment is an impeding factor. Some people simply avoid the formal system because they do not have enough disposable cash to meet all the financial expenditures associated with formal land transactions.

Finally, the prices as reported in the official records appear to be significantly under-estimated in order to reduce the tax liability. The collusion between cadastral and tax officials on the one hand, and buyers and sellers on the other, to report incorrect prices in return for informal fees and reduced tax payments is an important concern in this regard.

References

Chan S., S. Tep, and S. Acharya (2001), *Land Tenure in Cambodia: a Data Update,* Working Paper No. 19, (Phnom Penh: CDRI)

Sik Boreak (2000), *Land Ownership, Sales and Concentration in Cambodia,* Working Paper No. 16, (Phnom Penh: Cambodia Development Resource Institute)

So, S., S. Real, U. Uch, R. Sy, B. Ballard and S. Acharya (2001), *Social Assessment of Land in Cambodia,* Working Paper No. 20, (Phnom Penh: CDRI)

Williams, S. (1999), *Where has all the land gone? Review of Secondary Sources Relating to Land Tenure and Access Issues in Cambodia,* (Phnom Penh: Oxfam GB)