

Envisioning a New Paradigm of Development Cooperation in Cambodia

In this article, Eva Mysliwiec, Director of CDRI, reflects on development practice in Cambodia over the last two decades and argues for more effective development partnership, and change in donor behaviour and practice.*

There are a number of compelling arguments that suggest that it might be time to consider a new paradigm of development dialogue and cooperation. At the start of the twenty-first century the challenges to development cooperation are unprecedented. Among the many challenges is the fact that the number of disasters which the international community is called upon to respond to has increased fivefold, and they are nearly all of human creation. The relief, reconstruction and development efforts of today must respond not only to the alleviation of physical human misery, and restructuring of basic institutions and infrastructure, but must also attend to the healing of a damaged humanity. What is so challenging in such situations is that the context, circumstances, culture, nature of the transitions, and national and international considerations will affect understanding between partners and the effectiveness of cooperation. A factor which adds urgency to the need for change in the donor partner relationship is the failure of development cooperation to reverse the widening gap between rich and poor nations.

The Cambodian experience of the last two decades offers a rich source of food for reflection on development cooperation, having been witness to some of the best and worst of development practice. Many factors, both internal and external, have contributed to shaping the relationship and partnership between Cambodians and the aid community, requiring difficult adjustments on both sides. The relationships and nature of the cooperation have changed over time with Cambodians today assuming a more active role in defining the terms of the relationship, which includes a broad range of interlocutors and stakeholders. The imperative to reduce poverty, and the unsatisfactory results to date of development interventions and reforms towards this goal may be, at least in part, behind recent and encouraging initiatives undertaken by both the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC), and a number of donors in Cambodia to explore

ways of enhancing partnership. On the Cambodian side, Council for the Development of Cambodia (CDC) has proposed the formation of a Government-Donor Partnership Working Group (and three sub-groups) to participate in three studies on: Analysis of the Capacity Building Practices of Cambodia's External Partners, National Operational Guidelines for Development Cooperation, and Practices and Lessons Learned in the Management of Development Cooperation.¹ Multilateral and bilateral donors have also recently initiated a formal dialogue amongst themselves to enhance the effectiveness of cooperation through improved coordination and harmonisation. The following summary draws on lessons learned from the Cambodian experience of the last two decades and highlights a few of the elements deemed necessary for an effective partnership.

Requirements for meaningful development dialogue and effective partnership

In the last decade Cambodia has undergone dynamic change and the nature of the development dialogue and of development cooperation has changed as well. Development organisations have become significantly better at evaluating their work, and generating development knowledge. Making the link between learning and integrating that learning into development practice, however, remains a significant challenge to development cooperation. Also, organisations for whatever reasons, are slow to change; much of the expectation of change in a donor-partner relationship has been largely one-sided. Yet, if donors do not sufficiently appreciate the need to change, it is unlikely that they will be able to stimulate change in others. One need only look at the poor record of development cooperation in reversing the widening gap between rich and poor nations to realise that there is a need for a new paradigm in development dialogue and cooperation.

Post-conflict societies, which are today making unprecedented demands on ODA, pose complex challenges and special opportunities in development cooperation. They offer rare opportunities to change past systems and structures which may have contributed to economic and social inequities and conflict. In such situations development dialogue can make an invaluable contribution to fostering positive social change. At the same time opportunity engenders a responsibility to understand the context, the culture, the traditional forms of social organisation and power, lest ignorance leads to new forms of disempowerment or replicates old forms of inequity. Making the time to build and nurture relationships of trust, based on mutual respect, and making the effort to learn about and understand the societies we are attempting to assist are fundamental pre-requisites to any meaningful development dialogue and partnership.²

Where development dialogue provides an opportunity to transmit values caution must be exercised. The

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* This article is a summary of *The Case of Cambodia*, in "Dialogue in Pursuit of Development", Jan Olson and Lennart Wohlgenuth (eds), 2003; EDGI 2003-2.

level of conscientisation of indigenous groups may differ widely from that of foreign agency staff acting as catalyst. There is always the danger that foreign agencies unintentionally manipulate and impose their own ideological frameworks and priorities on local groups by promoting, for example, Western models of 'empowerment' or 'participatory development', or Western economic frameworks, especially where the process of the local people's 'critical consciousness' has not yet had time and sufficient opportunity to ripen and mature. In Cambodia, Western concepts of self-reliance and independence (encouraging communities to be independent) have not always been suitable and a development strategy based on the concept of inter-dependence between villagers and their government institutions would often have been much more appropriate, and more realistic in terms of long-term sustainability.

Coherence is essential for the effectiveness and credibility of a donor country's stance on good governance and participatory development. The conflicting signals of the donors, and inconsistency between rhetoric and action with respect to human rights over the last two decades has damaged their credibility, and weakened their position in the current discourse on a tribunal for example. A largely exclusive focus on civil and political rights only, has resulted in lost opportunities to sensitise Cambodians on other basic rights. Gender awareness and balance is another area where donor example is inconsistent.

Participation is still more rhetoric than reality.³ There is a need to improve the rhetoric of dialogue between donors and recipient countries. There remain a number of obstacles to genuine participation. In many cases the existing focus of participation is too narrow. Often, donors negotiate with governments or existing non-representative institutions; donors also relate mostly to other donors and do not always share information with civil society. Even though there is a perceptible increase in workshops which engage civil society and local actors, there is seldom time for meaningful participation, and too little information available in the local language. Other prerequisites for real participation include: *interdependence and equality*; *mutuality* - sharing information and analysis (translation of reports); *inclusion* - government and civil society being involved in design and planning, with Cambodians taking the lead in developing their development objectives and priorities; and *respect for local capacity* - aid should complement and supplement local resources.

Ownership is a subtle concept because it is in the minds of people. Governments or people can be said to own an activity when they believe that it empowers them and serves their interest. Government ownership is not something to be awaited, however; it sometimes needs to be nurtured. Whereas accountability to the do-

nor increasingly takes precedence over the needs of communities, reversing this trend would go a long way towards strengthening local ownership of development goals and interventions. Time, which allows for reflection and internalisation of new ideas, is a critical factor in ownership and for meaningful participation as well. Timetables need to respond more to Cambodian needs than donors' programming needs, and the process needs to take precedence over getting things done. Giving partners a say in the selection of technical assistance and greater responsibility for the financial management of projects will also contribute to greater ownership, particularly of grant aid.

Accountability and transparency are essential elements for partnership and should extend both ways. Non-transparent donor requirements and procedures, and tying aid to donor conditionalities, particularly in relation to procurement of goods and services from donor country suppliers, contribute to a lack of trust regarding the donor's motives and discourage national ownership of the process. Adopting practices that encourage trust, such as incorporating technical cooperation into the budget and the opening up of procurement markets, would enhance the accountability and transparency of technical cooperation and contribute to national ownership as well. On the other hand, a partner government must be able to convince donors, also through transparent mechanisms, that donor resources will be used efficiently, for the purposes mutually agreed upon. Accountability has too often been seen by the donor as a one-way process. Establishing mechanisms through which donors can be held accountable by communities or individuals, and introducing performance indicators for technical assistance would contribute to restoring some balance in the relationship between the partners in development dialogue.

Alignment and harmonisation of assistance are key to increasing the effectiveness of external assistance and to reducing transaction costs. The SWAP approaches implemented by some donors in support of the health, education, and decentralisation sectors in Cambodia stand out as an emerging example of donor alignment. The commitment of donors to align their support strategies with National Poverty Reduction Scheme (NPRS) priorities is a logical next step in a partnership based on shared responsibilities. This means that the Government has to manage resources effectively, transparently, and in line with NPRS priorities while donors should support the country by providing sufficient resources that are predictable in their level and timing and in a form that will yield the greatest benefit for the country.

Other types of alignment might also be considered. For example, donors could consider basing partnership

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