

My Decade with CDRI in Cambodia – A Personal Reflection

Introduction: Balancing independence and engagement

Over more than a decade as Executive Director of CDRI, I was invited to give many presentations about Cambodia and its development, both in Cambodia and elsewhere in the Asian region. I often began by saying “In the international development literature Cambodia is often described as a least developed, post-conflict, aid-dependent country, all relatively negative descriptors. I would like to present a more balanced picture of modern Cambodia’s remarkable development achievements since peace and stability were finally achieved in 1998, and the many challenges that remain.” It is this commitment to balance, to evidence-based research and analysis, and to constructive policy engagement and influencing that has guided my approach to leadership of CDRI.

The value of this approach was affirmed by the independent appraisal commissioned by the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) for their mid-term review of its five-year (2011-16) programme of partnership and support for CDRI (www.sida.se/publications). One of the key findings, based on an assessment of CDRI’s policy research products, activities and systems, and interviews with 25 stakeholders in government, its development partners, academia and the research community, the private sector and civil society, was that CDRI had “managed the balance of independence and engagement well”, being seen as a constructive but critical actor in policy debate in a complex political environment. They found this to be the case in both its research products and public forums, and in its private dialogue with government and other influential stakeholders in Cambodia’s development.

In reflecting on my past decade with CDRI, three things stand out for me—the pace of growth and change for both Cambodia and for CDRI; some

important lessons learned about real partnership, real institutional capacity building and real civil society; and how CDRI’s current and future development landscape is inextricably linked to its region—the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), ASEAN, East Asia and beyond.

A decade of growth and change—for Cambodia, for CDRI

The decade 2004-14 saw remarkable changes in both Cambodia and CDRI. At the CDRI leadership transition celebration in September, I reminded my colleagues of what we had achieved together. CDRI staff grew from 65 to 85, its annual operating budget from USD1.5 million to 2.5 million, and its research department from 20 to 45 researchers, from a position of having no Cambodian researchers with doctorates to having seven and rising. Our research programme was restructured to reflect five major priority development areas for Cambodia, with Cambodian senior researchers as coordinators of each programme. We introduced an Annual Development Review to disseminate some of our most policy-relevant research findings in an accessible form. We initiated, in partnership with our first private sector partner, ANZ Royal Bank, the annual Cambodia Outlook Conference, now in its ninth year, with increased attendance each year.

We achieved a strengthening of support from our major partner, Sida, from three-year programmes of support for core operating costs and our work on governance, particularly the decentralisation and deconcentration reforms, to a broader five-year programme of support to also fund important emerging issues such as inclusive growth, education and climate change. With strong support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada, we initiated the Development Research Forum (DRF) in Cambodia, a locally owned and driven partnership of leading research institutions—CDRI, Royal University of Phnom Penh, Royal University of Agriculture, The Learning Institute, National Institute of Public Health, and Cambodian Economic Association. Its six thematic research

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interest groups, each led by a DRF partner, and an annual Symposium and ICT platform provide opportunities for both established and emerging young researchers to share knowledge, learn from each other and build their research capacity.

With the support of IDRC and the Rockefeller Foundation we strengthened our regional collaborative Development Analysis Network to form a GMS-wide partnership involving leading research institutions from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and Yunnan province of China, with important work on issues such as inclusive growth in the GMS. And we worked hard, given the importance of regional integration and cooperation to Cambodia's future, to "regionalise" CDRI as an institution, playing active roles in regional research networks through various development policy partners and forums.

Some commonly misused terms: Partners, capacity building, civil society

Effective partnerships and long-term institutional capacity building have been fundamental to CDRI achieving its goals. Sadly, over my past decade with CDRI I have come to the conclusion that three of the most commonly misused terms in the local development lexicon are "partners" or "partnership", "capacity building" or "capacity development", and civil society". Why do I say this and why have I chosen to speak in so many regional and international forums on this subject?

I believe that too much of the overseas development assistance (ODA) delivered to less developed nations in our region has been supply driven rather than demand-driven, and not reflective enough of local initiative and ownership. Short termism in ODA commitments and delivery, and associated country programme design, remains a constraining factor on aid and its effectiveness, with too often a failure or incapacity to invest in the long-term strengthening of local institutions, and examples of distinct ideological and institutional favouritism in the choice of institutions where major investment is to be made.

Many of the aid management and coordination challenges faced by aid-dependent, least developed countries stem from the fact that international development cooperation is a very large and powerful multi-billion dollar industry. Until relatively recently this field has been dominated by the developed nations

and the multilateral development agencies they control, their own bilateral development agencies, consulting companies and individual consultants, many of whom are former employees of those development agencies, and the academic consulting arms of universities and research institutions facing income generating imperatives. This development industry, as international development policy and fashion changes, also regularly creates lucrative subindustries, including over the past two decades for example, on governance, gender, capacity development and, most recently, aid effectiveness itself.

Our genuine partners

Over the past decade, CDRI has enjoyed positive project and resource collaboration with most of the multilateral and bilateral partners in Cambodia's development, but it has had two genuine development partners who have strongly supported our goals and activities—Sida and IDRC. Sida has been with CDRI from early in its history, building its support over the years until it is now CDRI's most significant long-term partner. The five-year programme of Sida support for core operating costs enables CDRI to achieve high standards of governance, efficient operating systems and institutional strengthening, as well as to conduct high quality research on governance and public sector reform, inclusive growth, education, skills and employment, and climate change.

IDRC has provided invaluable medium to long-term support for CDRI's GMS Development Analysis Network (GMS-DAN), DRF Phases I and II, and an innovative programme on climate change and water resource governance in Cambodia, a partnership of CDRI with the Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology (MOWRAM), Tonle Sap Authority, Institute of Technology of Cambodia and Royal University of Agriculture. In both cases, these "real" partners demonstrate respect for local ownership and initiative, the value of a medium to long-term investment in local institutions, demand-rather than supply-driven programme development, and two-way transparency and accountability.

What does 'real' capacity building mean?

On any day, the lobbies of Phnom Penh's hotels are full of signs directing participants to a wide range of development seminars, workshops and other events. Many of these are promoted as "capacity

building” but they are in fact short-term training or awareness raising exercises, some of value, some not, and often piecemeal, superficial and without sound research foundations. Our experience at CDRI has taught us that effective institutional capacity building or development, particularly for a research institution, involves a combination of institutional needs analysis, institutional redesign and strengthening, the upgrading of educational and professional qualifications and skills through postgraduate education, professional development and training programmes, the provision of expert technical advice and skills transfer, as well as institutional collaboration, personnel exchanges and internship schemes. It can also be most effective, in our local context, when it involves longer-term institutional collaboration between weaker and stronger research institutions, particularly in the countries of our region (ASEAN, China, South Korea and Japan) where longer-term economic and development relationships will lie. Over-reliance on expensive international consultants and technical advisers, often short-term rather than long-term investments in building local capacity and ownership, means capacity substitution rather than capacity development, and entrenches dependency. “Real” institutional capacity building is a mindset that requires strong commitment; it is demanding for both management and staff; it is challenging to design effectively; it must be strongly internally owned and driven; it usually requires both internal and external expertise; it is expensive and time consuming; and it is never completed, as an institution’s environment and client needs change.

Towards a ‘real’ civil society in Cambodia

In 2013 CDRI researchers published two controversial papers, with my encouragement, titled *NGOs and the Illusion of a Cambodian Civil Society* and *20 Years’ Strengthening of Cambodian Civil Society: Time for Reflection* (Ou and Kim 2013a, b). They raised important public policy issues about the role, quality and governance of Cambodia’s vast, diverse NGO community, and the immaturity of any real civil society despite decades of significant international financial support. Over the previous decade I had also become increasingly concerned at the very uneven quality and effectiveness of NGOs in Cambodia, despite their large numbers, receipt of very large amounts of financial support, often with weak or

non-existent monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and a poor understanding of and commitment to high standards of governance in their own organisations while advocating this for others,.

I came to Cambodia after a professional career in Australia that featured major involvement in leading civil society organisations and networks, as a trade union industrial advocate, as a staff member then Board member then Board Chair of the Public Interest Advocacy Centre, one of Australia’s leading public interest legal centres, and as the Australian Consumer Association’s nominee on the NGO certification committee of what was then called the Australian Council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA), the peak body for the many Australian NGO’s involved in international aid.

With this background, I was very pleased to serve a term on the NGO certification committee of the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC)’s NGO Good Practice Programme (NGO-GPP), an important locally owned and driven mechanism to promote improved governance, transparency and accountability in the NGO community. This experience exposed me to the quality services delivered by many Cambodian and international NGOs and their peak bodies, such as the NGO Forum and CCC, who play useful roles in health, education, women and youth development, community development, microfinance, election monitoring and other sectors. They also demonstrate a commitment to good governance and constructive engagement in policy influencing with government, development partners and the research community. I would encourage others who have not demonstrated this level of maturity to more often “practice what they preach” in improved governance, transparency and accountability, responsible engagement, and the use of objective research-based evidence in their advocacy and activism.

The development paradigm, Cambodia and its region—and some game-changers?

Immediately before I came to CDRI and Cambodia, I worked for ten years as Director of The Asia-Australia Institute, an independent think-tank working on Australian foreign policy, regional integration and major geopolitical trends in East Asia, with a network of leading policy and research institutions across the region. When I was appointed the CDRI Board encouraged me to use this background to

situate CDRI more strategically as both a national and regional policy research institution.

As a result, over the decade we have established extremely rewarding collaborations with institutes of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the Korean Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP)'s East Asian Institutes Forum, the World Bank East Asian Development Network (EADN), the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and ADB Institute's regional development think-tank networks, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP)'s ARTNeT research network on trade and Singapore's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), and actively supported the establishment of and partnership with the Myanmar Development Resource Institute (MDRI).

This positioning has helped us achieve our goal of having CDRI at the table of many of the significant policy research discussions on Asian regional integration and cooperation and their implications for the region's and for Cambodia's socio-economic development and shared regional future.

In 2011 I was invited by Professor Zhang Yunling, Director of International Studies of CASS, to join a team of regional experts working on a project he was leading for the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA), on the theme *Moving Toward a New Development Model for East Asia: The Role of Domestic Policy and Regional Cooperation*. My contribution was to be a chapter on *ASEAN Small Less Developed Economies: Need for a New Approach* (Strange 2012). My contribution to this study enabled me to bring together many of the ideas I have presented in national and regional forums, and both published and unpublished writings over the past decade.

In summary, I believe that a more effective approach to development cooperation for Cambodia and for other developing countries in East Asia, to achieve better outcomes in institutional and human resource capacity development, should involve a more regional approach with the following features:

- a greater respect for and sensitivity to local needs and local ownership;
- a reduction in overt or covert conditionality in the provision of development assistance;
- a focus on long-term institution building and capacity development; a more sophisticated understanding of the complexity of anti-

corruption and governance strategies in different systems, and their role in poverty reduction and sustainable development;

- long-termism in ODA design and delivery; a more effective role for ODA-private sector partnerships;
- a greater respect for and mobilisation of local experience and expertise, and the sharing and developing of solutions and regional models; and, very importantly
- the establishment of long-term collaborative institutional partnerships between governments, the private sector, education, policy and research institutions, and civil society organisations in the East Asian region—all useful building blocks for regional development cooperation, but also for a future regional community. (Strange 2006)

Even with the current complex regional geopolitical tensions in East Asia, progress in the design and implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) of the ASEAN 10 member states plus China, South Korea, Japan, India, Australia and New Zealand, or ASEAN+6 in shorthand, provides a promising vehicle to achieve this more regional approach to effective development cooperation for Cambodia and other developing countries in our region. ASEAN+6 leaders, during the annual ASEAN summitry in Myanmar in 2014, reaffirmed their commitment to achieve agreement on the RCEP framework by the end of 2015 then move to implementation, building on AEC 2015 and other regional free trade and cooperation agreements. RCEP specifically acknowledges the diversity of member economies and the special circumstances of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (the CLMV), requiring flexibility for special and differential treatment, including a commitment to mandate economic and technical cooperation to reduce development gaps.

The year 2014 saw not only a commitment by the ASEAN+6 countries to the progress of RCEP, but also some other significant developments that may well be game-changers for Cambodia and its development paradigm. These include the establishment of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) New Development Bank in Shanghai and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in Beijing, both of which Cambodia has signed up to. At the 2014 GMS Summit, China's President Xi Jinping

also announced huge infrastructure development assistance and investment by China in GMS infrastructure and connectivity linked to poverty reduction and production capacity, and new AIIB funds, linked to China's land and maritime Silk Road initiatives. While the details of some of these new initiatives and development resources are not yet clear, they are likely to impact significantly on Cambodia's and its immediate neighbourhood's development landscape.

Cambodia, art and life

Finally, one of the great joys for me over this decade has been the local contemporary art scene, the acquisition of an eclectic collection of Cambodian contemporary art, and friendships with some of Cambodia's leading contemporary artists and performers. In April 2013, I had the privilege of attending a week of major events in the Season of Cambodia cultural festival in New York which brought together many Cambodian artists in the visual and performing arts for a month-long programme of performances, exhibitions, seminars and associated events initiated and coordinated by Cambodia Living Arts and its partners.

In just one week I attended the solo exhibition by Cambodia's leading contemporary artist, Pich Sopheap, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and his associated interview with the exhibition's curator to a packed Met auditorium; a performance of Sophiline Cheam Shapiro's powerful contemporary dance work *A Bend on the River* in the Joyce Theatre, with giant modular rattan crocodiles by Pich Sopheap and music by leading composer Him Sophy; and a panel discussion involving these three artists moderated by US-based Cambodian cultural academics, again to a packed audience at the prestigious Asia Society.

I believe the vibrancy of cultural life and the arts to be an important indicator of the stage of development and social health of a nation and a society. Economic growth alone does not mean prosperity. Art and aesthetic development are also key to building a creative, harmonious and prosperous society that values diversity. I hope that these courageous local artists, and the emerging younger generation of artists, will be more visible, valued and supported as Cambodia moves forward.

Conclusion: CDRI's leadership succession

I had always hoped that, when the time came for me to step down, I would be succeeded by a suitable qualified Cambodian. In mid-2014 the CDRI Board appointed Dr Chhem Rethy, an eminent Cambodian, then Director of Division of Human Health, Department of Nuclear Sciences and Application at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and keen to return to serve in Cambodia, as CDRI's new Executive Director from September 2014. I was very pleased to accept his request that I continue to be engaged as a Senior Advisor to CDRI to support a smooth leadership transition to the end of 2015, while exploring other opportunities to serve Cambodia in the future.

I would like to conclude by sincerely thanking my many CDRI colleagues, Board Chairs and members, past and present, and our partners and stakeholders, for making this both a very challenging but deeply rewarding and life-changing experience. May CDRI grow and prosper in the service of Cambodia and its people.

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