

Reflection 2009: Challenges in Making a Difference...

I am at the end of 2nd year in my job as Freelance Consultant. 2009 was another busy year for me in my consultancy activities. My track record shows that I have worked directly with 601 people from 69 Organizations, 93% were local NGOs, and 4 NGOs were network Organizations¹. The number of contract days was 211.5 spreading over 33 pieces of work/contracts: 35% (74 days) were spent on Facilitation services, 32% on Evaluation/ Research, 26% on Training, and 7% on Coaching activities. A number of requests could not be responded due to too short notices or no availabilities. Participants mentioned that they have enjoyed a fun learning environment and have achieved their expected outputs. Flexible fees were charged from different NGOs based on their different levels of budget availabilities. I do this in order to provide opportunities to small NGOs to have access to my services.



Successes

In 2009, I have the chance to work with many local (Cambodian) NGOs, some of them are relatively small, but some are large. At least 2 small NGOs with limited budget for capacity building contacted me a head and booked my times in far advance, so that later on I have to say "No" to other large NGOs (with big budget) because I committed to that contracts and applied my principle of "first come, first serve". In general, there was an indication from NGOs to strive for internal good practice as some of them started to look a bit seriously into their Organization Development, and learn to make some differences. The NGO Good Practice Project (NGO GPP), a project of the CCC, is a place where people could consider as a starting point to develop standard of good practice. Many requests were made on project evaluation focusing on impact assessment, strategic planning as well as monitoring and evaluation. NGOs indicated that they have now the needs to report about "changes in target groups" to their stakeholders rather than just reporting in number, and this leads them to look at program quality (including supporting factors to achieve it) as well as the way they can collect qualitative information from their target communities.

¹ Members of each network organization were not counted. Only host organizations were counted.

A number of organizations I worked with indicated that they need to go through a proper process in their Organization Development such as strategic planning, system / policy review and development, values clarification, evaluation etc. so that they could have those plans, systems and policies developed while staff have learned from the process at the same time. Those NGOs have well planned activities and gave sufficient notices for Consultant, so proper arrangements (including having sufficient times for preparation and design) could be made.

It was great for me to see some NGOs made good shift in their internal management and staffing. Senior Managers (including Directors) of a number of Cambodian NGOs, who were outgrown of their capacity, have considered changing their roles / positions within their organizations, in order to better respond to changing needs and external demands that require more standard and professionalism. Furthermore, at least 5 small local NGOs I worked with in 2009 were able to overcome nepotism issues and practice accountability and transparency in their organizations. They were woken up from a situation of managing NGO in a "Family Business Mode". Overall, through our formal and informal contact, it was an increased understanding amongst NGOs of Organization Development Needs and their rational.

The most important success for me of the year was that I have some choices to undertake the work and its process based on my values rather than just follow clients' agenda / process. For example I can write a staff policy for an Organization in 2 days, but I decided not to do in that way as we will have result (the policy) that not owned by staff.



Challenges

As mentioned above, a number of Organizations requested for services in the last minutes, making me (as Consultant) unable to respond as either I was not available or have no proper times to make a good preparation to ensure high service quality. This indicated their weak ability in planning, scheduling, lack of strategic thinking or bureaucratic procurement procedures. In Cambodian context, not able to respond to the (immediate) requests will make clients unhappy and can potentially affect future relationships.

There were a number of Organizations who wanted to do a "quick fix" for their internal development. They wanted to show (pretended) good practice, but not wanted to do it properly with appropriate process. For example, in a 4-day training, we introduced 5 main topics to NGO Directors/Managers in order to raise their awareness of these topics and help them to think what they should do more for their organization... The topic on Strategic Planning was one day (other topics were ½ day each)... We observed that some participants wanted to be able to do their own strategic planning as they requested format, sample and guideline so that they can fill in.

A number of Cambodian NGOs are facing challenges in Capacity. For 10-15 years ago, they have started the Organization (as founder) with very high commitment. Fundraising was also easy at that time as Donors did not require much high capacity and professionalism. Now, demand for good practice and professionalism is high. NGOs even compete each others for funds². However, it was observed that Capacity of the Directors of many NGOs is outgrown. They used to say "I am old, I cannot learn anymore...", "I cannot absorb new thing...", "I have some problem of remembering things...", "However, this is my organization, and I should not give up the Director's position to someone else". So, from that point of view, we can conclude that an Organization is understood as someone's own Property, and not an Institution to serve public interest. It is also a challenge for Consultant/Facilitator to raise this issue openly as s/he will get big tension. This has confirmed me during a workshop with 26 NGOs' Directors/Managers.

There still a challenge for Cambodian NGOs regarding the nepotism issue. Some NGOs operate openly, employing relatives, and some other employ relatives in a hidden manner (not announced officially as relatives), but there were many gossip behind the scene. Those organizations claimed that when they started the Organizations, they worked on voluntary basis (without pay) and they asked their relatives (spouse, children etc.) for helps without pay too. Now, they got funding and they are paid staff. However, it is impossible to fire their relatives as they fell it is unfair to those relatives who have voluntary supported the Organization during the start up phase.



Communities
supported
by NGOs

² AusAid in Cambodia funds only 1/10 proposals as announced in Multi-stakeholders workshop conducted by NGO GPP on 8 December 2009 in Phnom Penh Hotel.

During my work in 2009, I also observed that NGOs are still facing challenge in their working approaches. It was a confusion between who they want to help and approaches they should take, e.g. when an NGO wants to help the poorest, it doesn't mean that it has to work exclusively with the poorest or to help women victims, we should not only work with women (men should be included in program as an approach to help women). Furthermore, NGOs still do many overlapped activities – e.g. it was reported that many networks were established to work on child issues without proper coordination. Many NGOs in the provinces are still doing integrated community development activities. Their program activities are not coherent / cohesive with each others, and they have not developed any specific expertise in their Capacity (what they are really good at) and finally all provincial NGOs operate similar integrated projects. Furthermore, many NGO staff said that their NGO wants to work in area where there are no other NGOs working in the area. By doing in this way, there is no systematic approach in providing development interventions to poor communities, and as result, intervention is not effective (no positive changes) and Organizations just remain in responding to people emergency needs.

Finally, I was frequently asked the old question: "as NGOs, are we donors' driven? Should we do everything to please donors? Should we consider Donors as partner or as Supervisor?" From my perspective, less or more "Donors driven" is unlikely to be avoided, but the question is "in what way?" Many NGOs said that their (local) Donors require them to comply/follow with everything, and they work like sub-contractors rather than partners. Often, meetings conducted by Donors were called in the last minutes (very short notice), and some Cambodian staff working as Donors have demanded from NGOs more than what stated in their rules and policies... In other way, Donors have demanded from their partners for good internal practice, better management, better program quality and greater positive impact on community etc. This (Donors' influence) can be an effective way to enhance organizational effectiveness as NGOs tend to listen more to Donors.

2009 was a great year for me in term of learning as I have actually learned a lot (from successes and challenges) from working with various Cambodian NGOs and also with communities, who are target groups of those NGOs. It was also great to pull some resources from professional people to work as team with me. My personal and professional development was benefited from the work. It seems more than a full-time job, but I could cope with that and have built a lot of network. My main strategy to cope with workload was not reluctant to say "No" to requests in order keep the work manageable while ensuring quality. I also took sometimes to write some short OD articles (in Khmer and English) and shared with NGOs through the website. Many colleagues appreciated that sharing.

Aside from learning from the work, I have met colleagues and we provided coaching to each others in a number of occasions. I also attended a leadership retreat facilitated by VBNK in Kampot, and have gained a lot of insights from participants' experience during the open space sessions. Other learning was depending on reading resources.

For the future, I will recruit some talent young people to support me with a purpose to provide learning opportunity for them to build practical experience in capacity building and consultancies. I will put more useful and short articles regarding learning and organizational development in the website and encourage Cambodian Development Practitioners to read. I am looking forward to more challenging work, which also provides me a lot of learning opportunities.

Thanks to all Colleagues, Clients and Donors who have approached or recommended me and used my services, and who actually strive for good practice for making a difference in term of positive change in Cambodia's development.

*Reflection written by
Leng Chhay
January 2010*



Please visit our new updated website www.camlefa.org