

A Window of Transparency:

The efforts of the One Window Service Office to establish transparency in administrative services

Transparency and openness in government is not easy to achieve where there has been a history of patronage and favoritism underlying service delivery. In Cambodia however, a small pilot now replicated by the World Bank financed DFGG project to reach twenty-five districts and municipalities has introduced a vastly different approach to the delivery of administrative services. Transparency of fees and processes has resulted in vastly improved performance and standards of services, fewer intermediaries in the process and a significant reduction in informal payments. While this approach still only represents a small portion of administrative services, it has set a new standard for sub-national administrations and offers a model for replication as functions are decentralized to local government. This note sets out how this transparency was achieved and the opportunities and challenges for the future.

With the goal of enhancing service delivery and citizen trust in government, the One Window Service Office (OWSO) initiative in Cambodia started as a small pilot in two secondary cities– Battambang and Siem Reap. With strong support from the Minister of Interior and with financing from the DFGG project, this small effort by AsiaUrbs has now been replicated to over twenty provinces, introducing, for the first time, a broad foundation of transparent and accountable service delivery in local level administrative services.

The OWSO initiative is focused on two primary elements of governance reform. First, the delegation of services from provincial line departments to district one-stop shops to shift services closer to citizens (see Learning Note 9). To date, ten ministries have delegated 186 services to these districts, establishing a single window for administrative services such as motor bike licenses, construction permits, notarization of education certificates. And second, the adoption of transparency and accountable principles in the delivery of these services.

Efforts and achievements to date

A number of operational strategies were adopted to promote new layers of transparency between various stakeholders engaged in the delivery of a service.

Procedures at the interface between the citizen and the district offices were radically overhauled to enhance openness and access to information.

- A schedule of fees is now on permanent public display in all OWSO front offices where citizens apply for services.

- Changes in fees are rare, but are immediately reflected on public noticeboards.
- Transactions take place at open counters in easily accessible public offices. In the past, transactions took place in closed spaces – in provincial offices or in residences and shops.
- Transactions require receipts to be issued for the application and related payment.
- Citizens should not need (in most cases) to go outside the OWSO for more than one official stamp or signature. There are exceptions to this however.
- All OWSOs display a sign with the rule “do not pay more than the official fee”, and information on how to make a complaint.
- Applicants apply for services themselves to learn about the fee and the process; middlemen are not allowed.
- Guidelines regarding expected staff performance and behavior are available from the OWSO Information Officer/District Ombudsman and NCCDS/DST’s website.



Photos of fee signboards and warning sign to clients not to make informal payments.

Staff are assigned responsibility for transparency and access to information. The Information Officer in the OWSO front office is the first point of contact between citizens and the OWSO. His/her role is to answer questions regarding specific services, assist in the completion of application forms, and inform citizens of the fees and time required for processing applications. In general, information on OWSO services is fairly reliable. Information officers understand their specific role, are trained in the processes and with exception on occasion, perform to an acceptable standard.

Financial records are kept according to internal procedures and are made available to the public on request. Accounts are kept by a Finance Officer and



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District OWSO Manager, revenue is checked against transactions, verified at the district level and also with the national support team in the Ministry of Interior. Annual aggregated revenue of OWSO is made available on the OWSO website (www.owso.gov.kh).

Public forums promote openness and dialogue. To enhance accountability, public meetings provide an opportunity for the districts to provide information on OWSO service standards and to receive feedback should these standards not be met. The efforts to establish a District Ombudsman to represent citizens provides an embedded channel for complaints handling.

Challenges

The new level of transparency achieved by OWSOs across Cambodia is by far and away the success of the initiative, and critical to the accountability achieved. Nevertheless, both internal and external factors currently limit the level of transparency achieved, and the consistency achieved across provinces.

- **Some service standards lack clarity.** Processing times are still determined by line ministries, often without consideration of local constraints, such as distance and capacity. As a result, some OWSOs do not inform citizens how long it will take to process a transaction.
- **Communication skills are limited.** Although most Information Officers perform the roles to an acceptable standard, this is taking more time and budget than anticipated. More effort is needed to improve communication skills and ensure procedures are followed.
- **Demand for information remains low.** Citizen awareness of service standards – what to expect – is insufficiently developed and does not pressure officials to deliver a high standard of service. The awareness campaigns conducted by the OWSO are still producing limited results: NGO partnerships have resulted in marked improvement.
- **The discretion given to OWSO and district management is not always enhancing performance.** Despite the clarity of procedures, execution varies at the local level. The Deputy Governor in charge of the OWSO influences, to a great extent, whether or not rules are followed, especially if applications are discussed *ex parte*.
- **Skills and mandate of OWSO management.** The capacity of the Chief of the OWSO also determines the willingness of line ministry officials to operate in an open manner, especially over more complicated and potentially less transparent applications.

Recommendations

Immediate improvements in the OWSO performance can be achieved by learning from the lessons to date. This includes the following process improvements.

- Requiring that all OWSOs display service standards (esp. time commitments) along with the fee information.
- Keeping and displaying logs of time-taken for each transaction. Utilizing the management information system to keep track of delivery times and strengthening MOI's oversight role. Performance achievements should be displayed for the public, and a system of benchmarking established.
- Revisiting the design of awareness building approaches. Large public meetings and forums do not engage citizens effectively. Best practices to date include: (i) efforts to engage NGOs in outreach and awareness building – this has brought greater impact; (ii) feedback through commune councilors and smaller meetings held at commune level, as seen in Battambang – these are more effective as participants are freer to speak.

A key next step will be for the Ministry of Interior to embark on a broader transparency and access to information agenda, one that builds on the OWSO experience and enables it to gain momentum. Efforts can be made to immediately expand the principles of the approach to other parts of the district administration, supplemented by efforts in civil society to enhance citizen awareness of open government and create citizen demand and knowledge of what information is important to their livelihoods. The "citizens information" effort of the NCDD will be crucial in creating increased demand for transparency, especially as information is provided on budgets, standards and performance, and accompanied by an access to information awareness initiative.

The OWSO "window of transparency" is remarkable and still somewhat unique in the Cambodia context. The approach developed by the Ministry of Interior has resulted in an effective model for delivering administrative services, there is an increasing level of citizen confidence and businesses are becoming more willing to voluntarily join a regulated market. It remains however a small window that is affected by demand for transparency and by the practices of other parts of government. The implementation of the information strategy in the proposed social accountability framework provides a platform that will enable the achievements of the OWSO to spill over into a new degree of transparency and access to information in local service delivery.

The DFGG Learning Note Series provides quick summaries of the lessons learned in the DFGG project. The information is obtained from progress reports, workshops and World Bank Implementation Support missions. End evaluations will provide further reflection on the issues identified.

DFGG Learning Note 12 is based on lessons documented during 2012. This note was written by Ruud Corsel and Janelle Plummer. February 2013.