

Partnerships I: State – Non-State Partnerships in Cambodia

An initial overview

The importance of partnerships for poverty reduction in Cambodia is recognized in key policy documents, including the Rectangular Strategy and successive National Strategic Development Plans. In 2009, a key goal of the Demand for Good Governance Project was the development of state–non-state partnerships to improve governance. Since that time, a number of state and non-state entities have worked together on a vast range of activities. These have been initiated from both sides: civil society has monitored health and education services, worked together to build capacity for citizen engagement in councils, and collaborated on the development of alternative dispute resolution systems; and government has requested civil society support to monitor administrative services, and obtain feedback on performance. Partnerships between citizens, civil society organizations, subnational administrations and national implementing agencies, including the Ministry of Interior, are emerging as a potential channel for forging a more accountable and responsive government that addresses the needs of citizens. This Learning Note provides an initial overview of how partnerships are developing, and highlights some of the challenges in the Cambodian context.

Introduction

The term *partnership* means many things to different actors in Cambodia. Those concerned with understanding partnerships have different constructs in mind – from loose arrangements with occasional contact, to more integrated agreements sharing resources. With this in mind, a study on partnerships was instigated by the Ministry of Interior Governance Resource and Learning Center to better understand the partnerships that are formed between state and non-state actors, and to identify the enablers and disablers for more effective state–non-state partnerships.

What are partnerships?

Partnerships are relationships that are pro-actively developed between organizations to meet common goals. They are often quite complex. Mostly they embody a different spirit than a contractual relationship that normally implies a hierarchical relationship. Partnerships are not always permanent – they may be time-bound arrangements put in place to reach common goals. There is however an emphasis on mutual need between partners that recognizes the contribution of each partner.

Partnerships in Cambodia tend to involve two organizations that have mutually supporting goals. Many form partnerships because they have recognized that they can address their goals more effectively if they work together. The most common type of partnership found at the local level in Cambodia is one where state and non-state actors

work together to align priorities, activities and resources. Typically this form of cooperation, informal or formal, involves NGOs keeping local or other government actors aware of their plans, though in practice the relationship is more hierarchical. Most experience is found where partnerships are formed to deliver services (e.g. immunization campaigns, pre-schools) or infrastructure sub-projects (e.g. water pumps, maintaining village roads).

Some NGOs have also worked in partnership to influence government programs (e.g. improving the performance of district administrative offices, empowering women in maternal health projects, or governance capacity building in the GRLC). Such partnerships are generally still being tried out, but they create familiarity between the partners through relatively low-risk activities, and respond to emerging situations or specific gaps. They generally don't start with jointly setting more ambitious, strategic goals or jointly sharing resources.



How do they work?

Analysis of global experience suggests that the most effective partnerships embody a number of positive attributes such as harmony and consensus-based decision-making, shared risks, valued contributions, and striving for equity. This generates a form of *partnership working* that places a strong emphasis on working together, joint creation, shared leadership, and mutual accountability. This is not always easy though as these characteristics require significant effort to develop and sustain.

In any culture, some norms will be more conducive to making partnerships work and some less so. While many of these attributes fit well within the Cambodian culture, others don't, and this seems to have affected the way partnerships have developed and the kinds of partnerships that have emerged. On the one hand, consensus-based decision-making is very strong in Cambodia, especially at the local level – making the idea of partnership potentially



Partnerships I: Initial Overview

quite relevant and achievable. Many DFGG stakeholders also noted that the Cambodian sense of ceremony creates momentum, and the tendency for state and non-state actors to adhere to rules and norms makes for some predictability and clearly defined roles and responsibilities.

On the other hand, the hierarchies embodied in society in Cambodia have made it difficult to bring about equality in the partnerships that are formed. Civil society actors emphasize the importance of respecting those with authority and those with authority often expect to, and are mostly expected to, take decisions and control. Reconciling this fundamental attribute is difficult and is reinforced through everyday power relations. Stakeholders have noted that it is likely to influence the structure of partnerships and the roles of state officials for some time to come. Nevertheless, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) mostly report that their relationship with local government officials is positive. Feedback suggests positive experiences in local level meetings, good exchange of information and sharing of facilities. These are critical and helpful elements of a good working relationship. It is not clear yet whether or not they will lead to more advanced partnership forms – jointly developing strategies, aligning or combining resources, and/or supporting mutual decision-making.

To get things moving, and because of imbalance of power, much of the partnership practice in Cambodia appears to be framed around personal relationships rather than more institutionalized or formalized mechanisms and processes. In the past these have also relied more on informal negotiations, than on transparent and open meetings, and in this way also deviate from what is generally considered to be good practice in partnership building.

Enablers and disablers of partnerships in Cambodia

CSOs have also filled a gap where the state may not be able to deliver services. These actors are extremely diverse – knowledge, skills and resources vary. Many CSOs are struggling to find a balance between supporting government in fulfilling its responsibilities, and advocating on behalf of communities for more accountability to local communities. While many CSOs see their role as advocating for improved ways of meeting the development needs of poor communities, there is a dilemma in this position. Local NGOs often contribute in the “provider” role, delivering services under contract. And delivering services directly generates more income for CSOs through donor funding or fees (see DFGG Learning Note 3). This makes partnership development less manageable and switching roles is not always easy.

Another problem in the development of partnerships that focus on addressing local needs is that, in certain sectors at least, the national level partnerships determine local level activity. Civil society financing is often defined with a particular purpose (often by donors with sector-based financing) which may support development, but not be driven by the prioritization of local needs. While these

efforts are of course useful, there is generally insufficient funding for locally-led initiatives. A second problem noted by government and donors is the lack of capacity in civil society. Many districts cannot identify local CSOs with the knowledge, skills and experience to add value to government programs. In many cases, this gap is filled by international NGOs, but capacity is a problem that exacerbates the inequality of partnerships. At the same time, as noted elsewhere, there is a lingering lack of trust between government and civil society in some situations and around contentious issues.

Apart from the overarching cultural issues noted above, the research identified a number of blockages relating to the way government functions. Bureaucratic procedures and protocol, for instance, often slows the momentum of partnership development. Accountability is mainly upward in the system, not downward to poor communities. In addition, many government officials in local positions do not have the authority for day-to-day decision-making in the partnership. All these factors will need to be addressed as partnerships start to evolve and expectations increase.

Despite the factors constraining partnership development in the Cambodian context, the effort to increase communication and interaction between different stakeholder groups is reported to have positive ends. At the beginning of the DFGG project when the focus on partnerships was new, there was a tendency to count “interactions” – whatever they were. As the project progressed, the project teams started to consider the quality of partnerships and thereby the effectiveness of these relationships. Similarly, stakeholders have recognized that increasing the numbers of partnerships alone would not necessarily lead to greater accountability or development impact. And as the project nears closing, it is recognized by state and non-state actors alike that partnerships need to be carefully constructed to ensure that partners are able to deliver on their mutually agreed objectives. This is also leading to greater selectivity.

Overall, the concept of partnerships is becoming accepted at the local level in Cambodia. In the future, there will need to be further reflection on the formation, purpose and terms of partnerships, and there will need to be some effort to create more equity. To enhance understanding of how partnerships work, DFGG Learning Note 16 sets out a typology of partnerships around *function* and *form*, with examples from Cambodia. This effort is only a start. Moving forward, more systematic analysis of partnerships is needed, more understanding of the differences between sectors and more consideration of how key blockages can be overcome. The work of the DFGG project has only started a process, providing the opportunity for state and non-state actors to work together to reflect on how partnerships can help meet developmental goals.