Community Conversations

Beginning in 2007, VBNK has been hosting an annual community based conversation, bringing together a diverse group of people to discuss development issues in Cambodia. Each event has had an emphasis on trans-generational dialogue and therefore included young and older people, as well as those working inside and outside of the development sector. VBNK has found that community conversations create a safe space for participants to engage in dialogue and to identify and seek solutions to development issues. They also encourage people to have confidence in their own ideas and transcend traditional Cambodian hierarchies to allow young people to both express their ideas and listen to the older generation.

Subsequently there has been demand by participants and VBNK staff to hold community conversations regularly, to continue to look at the overarching issues in Cambodian development.

This briefing paper looks first at how community conversations work and second at their use across a broad range of issues and communities to demonstrate the potential and broad application of this method. We then explore our experience of community conversations and how we would like to build on the success of previous events in the future. The intention here is to demonstrate our commitment to this way of working and to inspire future uses of this tool amongst other development practitioners.

What is a community conversation?

The community conversation is an event where community members come together to unpack their own problems, decide on solutions and chart a course for action. It draws on a participatory approach of co-learning among facilitators and communities, where the facilitator too must critically examine her/his own attitudes and beliefs. This process of discovery and co-learning allows development practitioners and community members to be released from their fears and to work in beneficial ways with others.

At VBNK we have found that community conversations can have a very powerful affect on participants, allowing people who have never felt able to communicate before to do so. Through using an interactive, participatory approach to understanding issues and generating new thinking and potential solutions, community conversations encourage confidence in participants' own knowledge. In this way the community sets its own targets for what is to be achieved, and in so doing provides a more enduring plan for social change.

Community conversations are informing and deepening our understanding of the issues that are of importance to the Cambodian social development sector.

How do they work?

Relationship-building: Building a relationship of mutual trust, understanding and respect with communities is the foundation of a community conversation. It is critical that the facilitator develops an appreciation of local values when working with communities and thus deep listening, skilful questioning and participatory activities with communities also aid this process.

Identification of community concerns: Community concerns are issues that worry or disturb communities, and are triggered by their insights into the concerns. An underlying premise of the approach is that communities can and do identify their own concerns and needs. The facilitator's role is to guide them through strategic questioning. If the facilitator imposes his or her views onto

the community, this may not result in identifying the real concerns of the people. Consequently, any solution that evolves from such an imposition is doomed to fail.

Exploration of community concerns: Identified concerns are put through a rigorous exploration using community-sensitive language and techniques (such as storytelling and mapping). The exploration leads to a deeper understanding of the underlying factors contributing to the identified concerns.

Decision-making and planning: Communities make specific decisions for priority actions, based on the findings of their exploration. In this planning phase, communities are supported to apply the basic planning questions of 'what, how, when, where and who' to each decision made.

Action: Decisions taken consist of changes that must be implemented and sustained over time. It is important to involve as many community members as possible in the decision making, so that the community assumes ownership of the process and ensures the sustainability of the solution.

Reflection and review: This is a facilitated reflection and review that is based on respect for the capacity of communities to identify their own change goals and indicators of change. While reflection is a closing phase of the process, it is also a practice woven throughout the entire process. Community sessions conclude with a reflection and summary. Follow on sessions begin with a recap of agreements of the previous session and so on.

What do they hope to achieve?

By encouraging dialogue across difference, the community conversation contributes to social cohesion. We have also found that community conversations expand the ability of communities to transfer and share lessons with other communities (locally, regionally and nationally). This process of transfer, once started, has the potential to contribute to a scaled-up response to the issues identified.

The possibility of the methodology is to foster transformation and produce results. Actions proposed by a particular community often require interface with other organisations and wider civil society, and can influence advocacy efforts and the enforcement of human rights, including women's rights.

How have they been used in the Cambodian context?

In Cambodia the combination of hierarchical culture, patronage and an education system that discourages questioning has resulted in a reluctance to openly oppose, disagree with or even to question those who have power. This mindset has been exacerbated by Cambodia's legacy of genocide, civil war, displacement and loss. Living with uncertainty for a prolonged period of time has, for many, resulted in a loss of confidence and feelings of powerlessness, lack of trust, fear and a reluctance to take initiative. Thus the need to foster well-being and to strengthen social cohesion is of paramount importance to Cambodia's development.

Community conversations meet the development needs of this context in several ways: first, they provide a safe environment where debate and the exchanging of different ideas can occur; second, they allow for young and older people to listen to and learn from each other; and third, they draw on existing Cambodian knowledge, thereby increasing confidence and ownership.

Community conversations have a universal application across a variety of communities and for a diverse range of themes, and a number of organisations within Cambodia have made use of this tool. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has used community dialogues in relation to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. They report that these dialogues provide a far more effective tool for awareness-raising about HIV than the traditional lecture, pamphlets and posters, which often

leave communities with 'bleak, prescriptive messages that deny them the benefits of dialogue on how the community could be affected.' Instead, villagers have been able to talk openly, sometimes for the first time, about their concerns about HIV/AIDS. Prevalent myths about the virus have been discussed alongside the identification of how the virus spreads and ways it can be prevented.

The Khmer Youth Association has organised a series of camps to bring young people from different communes together to discuss and resolve obstacles for building youth solidarity. Natural resource management groups based in the Cambodian provinces have also used this tool as a way of bringing the community together with state actors to generate ideas and formulate action plans addressing natural resource management. The World Bank is promoting the growth of community conversations in Cambodia, with the aim of improving levels of governance and accountability. Their approach includes providing communities with tools and training in social accountability in order to develop and improve civil society and its ability to act as a check on the state.

VBNK Case Study

Since 2007 VBNK has held two community conversations, bringing together a diverse group of people to discuss Cambodia's past, present and future. The first of these events was an Intergenerational Dialogue, held in Phnom Penh, when young and old people came together to explore critical social issues in Cambodia. The success of this event led to a follow-up event in 2008.

The second VBNK community conversation was held in Benteay Meanchey province. This conversation brought together community members, development practitioners, local authorities and government officers from different age groups and life experiences. Together, the group reviewed Cambodian history, identified pressing existing social issues and explored how to contribute towards addressing those issues.

The conversation began with participants remembering the past and producing a river of life depicting the critical issues they could recall from Cambodia's history. A similar task was undertaken to envision an ideal future for Cambodia, and so issues that prevent Cambodia realising its potential emerged. Next participants reflected back on and drew out lessons from Cambodia's history. A final planning activity got participants to identify pathways to change that a generation, an individual, a family and others can contribute to transforming the critical issues.

Feedback from participants has been very positive. Participants appreciated the opportunity to reflect on and explore critical events that have shaped Cambodian society from the past to present. They highlighted how the different participatory techniques such as drawing a river of life to talk about Cambodia's history and the visioning exercise created a 'joyful' learning environment, where they could express their ideas freely. In addition, our annual impact assessment (conducted later in the year) revealed that participants had gained confidence in expressing their ideas, developed a greater amount of understanding of other generations and were more willing to get involved with social and community work.

Where do we go from here?

Our experience has clearly demonstrated that community conversations are a powerful mechanism to break the silence about the recent past and to initiate conversations across generations about working together to create new possibilities. Its power is that it provides communities with the space to identify and talk about crucial issues and subjects that may be otherwise silent. Several specific themes including poverty and persistent insecurity, HIV/AIDS, gender and sexuality, engaging men as allies against gender-based violence, youth and drug abuse, and the link between

unemployment and cross-border migration for work have all emerged as conversation topics that could be explored in the future.

Conversations are also about breaking down hierarchy and promoting equity through open access to information and participation across gender, age, ethnicity, and class. Ways of including and involving as many people as possible are a key concern of the process. In VBNK we use pictures, so that those who may not have learnt to read can also participate. We also draw on story-telling to stimulate conversations about family and community experiences and cultural meanings. Using creative participatory approaches provides a safe space for listening, inclusion, invitation and agreement-making.

To learn more about community conversations or for details about how you can support VBNK in staging a community conversation, please contact Vanly Virya, Co-Programme Manager at VBNK.

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