

Community conversations: A tool for promoting social inclusion

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Abstract

The community conversation provides a forum for community members, NGOs and local Government officials to come together to identify and untangle problems, decide on solutions, and map out a course for action. While each community conversation is built around an overarching theme, the agenda is not overly prescribed. Instead, a series of interactive and creative processes are planned that encourage participants to listen to one another and provide space for community members to surface issues that are important to them. The intention is to help participants to draw on their own strengths and to move beyond an expectation of learning led from the outside. This requires participants and facilitators alike to commit to genuine participation and co-learning.

The paper will draw on examples on our experience facilitating different community conversations to illustrate how participatory and creative processes have been used to encourage confidence to speak out, to generate new thinking, to promote dialogue across difference, and to help individuals break away from a culture of blame that discourages community engagement in development. This paper will also describe how VBNK has been using community conversations as an action-learning tool and how issues surfaced in any one conversation, shape subsequent conversation themes. In so doing, we will highlight how, through facilitating community conversations, VBNK staff members have been challenged to question their commitment to a participatory development practice.

Introduction

Since 2007, VBNK has held annual community based conversations, each one bringing together a diverse group of as many as 100 people to discuss development issues in Cambodia. Drawing on examples from different community conversations, this paper is in two parts: part one describes the community conversation and how the conversation themes evolve over time and presents some of the results tracked through VBNK's annual impact assessment studies. These include (a) how community conversations provide a safe space for community members to be in conversation with

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other civil society actors and to identify and seek solutions to critical development issues; and (b) how, in this way, community conversations make possible shared ownership of development initiatives by a broader sector of society. Part two looks at how the community conversation methodology has challenged our facilitation practice and thus influenced our own action learning.

I. Part one

Why do community conversations work?

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 (Leng and Pearson, 2006, Pearson 2011). This is exacerbated by Cambodia's history of genocide and civil war and lingering feelings of displacement, loss and uncertainty. These effects work against efforts to promote community participation in development activities.

The Government's 10-year National Programme for Sub-National Democratic Development (NP-SNDD, 2010-2019) is designed (a) to bring changes from a centralised management system to decentralised and deconcentrated management systems based on the principles of democratic participation, transparency and accountability; (b) to promote local development and delivery of public services to meet the needs of citizens; and (c) to strengthen good governance, autonomy and democratic accountability of sub-national administrations. But while it is widely recognised that genuine civic engagement is required for the decentralisation reform process to really happen, approaches are needed that empower and build confidence of civil society organisations to fully engage in and contribute meaningfully to the reform process and to ensure citizens can and do evaluate the activities of the councils and their administrations and hold them accountable.

Community conversations meet the development needs of this context in several ways: first, they provide a safe environment where debate and the exchange of different ideas can occur. Second, they allow for people to listen to and learn across difference (younger and older, male and female etc.). Third, they draw on existing Cambodian knowledge, thereby increasing confidence and ownership.

Community Conversations have been used in various contexts in Cambodia. UNDP, for example, deployed community conversations in addressing the HIV/AIDS epidemic. They reported that these dialogues provided a far more effective tool for awareness raising about HIV than the traditional

lecture, pamphlets and posters, which often left communities with “*bleak, prescriptive messages that deny them the benefits of dialogue on how the community could be affected*” (UNDP 2005). Instead, villagers were able to talk openly, sometimes for the first time, about their concerns about HIV/AIDS and to challenge prevalent myths that were contributing to discrimination and isolation for families affected by HIV/Aids. The World Bank has supported the growth of community conversations in Cambodia as a complement to training in the use of social accountability approaches and tools as part of its effort to improve levels of governance and accountability. The Khmer Youth Association has organised camps to bring young people from different communes together to discuss and resolve obstacles for building youth solidarity.

Each conversation builds on an Action-Reflection-Learning-Planning cycle model (ARLP; Taylor et al. 1999) and includes five “value” components:

- a. The facilitators must first establish their credibility with community members. They do so by taking time to *build relationships based on trust, understanding and respect*. Deep listening, skilful questioning and creative activities that encourage genuine participation aid this process.
- b. The facilitators must ensure that the focus of any conversation is on the *identification of community concerns* and not an externally driven agenda (their own or others). This requires a fundamental belief that communities can and will voice their concerns and needs, if they are given the space and if they feel listened to.
- c. That being said, facilitators cannot merely accept things at “face value.” Instead they must challenge participants to *rigorously explore the identified concerns* using community-sensitive language and techniques (such as visual mapping and story telling), so as to uncover the underlying causes.
- d. The facilitators then work with the community members to *build agreements on the priorities* and to *plan for action*. This is achieved through the basic planning questions of ‘what and why, how, when, where and who’ to each decision made.
- e. Facilitated *reflection and review* is woven throughout the entire process. Each community session concludes with a reflection and summary. Follow on sessions begin with a recap of agreements of the previous session and so on.

In the next section we will further explore the conversation process and show how the conversation themes build on one another and shape themes in subsequent years.

How do they work?

In 2008 the community conversation (*Making a different society for tomorrow*) brought together participants from Banteay Meanchey and five surrounding provinces in northeast Cambodia. Participants included community members (ranging in age from 17 to 73) as well as development practitioners and local government officials. The conversation drew on café style conversations; small group discussions; plenary sharing of learning and individual reflections; and creative expression (through drawing and role play); and personal journaling. The intention throughout was to encourage “talking from the heart” and to ensure that those participants with limited writing skills or limited experience would “dare” to speak.

The ARLP cycle provided a template for the flow of individual sessions, beginning with a review of Cambodian history and accompanying changes in society (remembering the past). Participants then identified their vision for the future before listing out contemporary social issues that would prevent the vision from becoming a reality. They also explored the underlying factors contributing to these issues. Finally, they looked at how community members and civil society actors could work towards addressing those issues through three simple questions: how can my generation contribute? How can I contribute? What contributions do I expect from others?

Conversations across generations are about breaking down hierarchy, promoting equity and working together to create new possibilities. They are also about learning to listen to one another, as the following example illustrates. We found that the ‘middle-aged’ group – largely made up of NGO and local Government staff – quickly got down to business, energetically drawing their river of life and representing critical issues. But while they were quick to grasp the content and process, they also tended to rely on ‘development-speak’, and it was difficult to challenge them to rethink their ideas. The ‘senior’ group, on the other hand, took more time to recall their history and appeared overwhelmed by all they had experienced. The ‘young’ were excited to have been included, but soon realised how little they knew about Cambodia’s past. As one young woman noted: *I realised that we don’t know much about Cambodia’s recent history – we’ll only find out by listening to what other generations tell us.*

At the start of the community conversation we were concerned that participants were pointing out the problems of others. *Government officials are corrupt. Teachers are not committed to their work and ask for bribes.* However, the conversation began to shift on day two, and by day three,

participants began to own their contributions to the issues by asking: *how am I contributing to corruption? Have I ever paid a bribe to get something done? What can I do differently?*

While these shifts were significant we left asking ourselves if we had dug deeply enough into the issues identified and if the commitments that had been made to work together for change would persist beyond the 3-day event. In 2009, the Community Conversation focused on the period 2000-2009, a period marked by double-digit growth in Cambodia. Participants were asked to consider a more direct question: *A decade of change – has it made a difference?* The conversation began by first asking participants to identify positive changes before asking them to name the critical issues facing communities. They were also asked why these issues persist. The participants drew the following conclusions: There is increased talk about gender, but gender inequities persist. There are increased opportunities to participate in various development forums. Yet communities still feel that development is something that is 'done' to them. And traditional social norms and expectations continue to prevent women and men from demanding improved services and participating in development processes.

Two distinct elements were apparent in the vision for change generated by the participants. The first of these related to more visible development goals, namely: accessible and responsive social services, transparent and accountable local governance, responsible natural resource management, and livelihood security. The second set related to underlying values – a culture of sharing and working together; respect; transparency and honesty; and a desire for social harmony. This underscores an assumption we make about the importance of fostering social cohesion in Cambodia society.

For this reason, the 2010 conversation focused on the theme: *how can we work together to promote social harmony*. At the end of the 2010 event, we noticed how shifts in the conversation were suggesting that participants were beginning to reflect on their positive and negative contributions to promoting social cohesion. There was also increased discussion about good governance and social accountability. Accordingly we focused the 2011 community conversation on social accountability by asking: *How can we work together to ensure that public services do meet the needs of citizens and contribute to poverty reduction?*

This section has shown how the theme of a community conversation evolves from year-to-year. This provides participants and VBNK alike with an opportunity to identify issues that are of importance to communities and to reflect on how these issues are being addressed by civil society organisations and local Government agencies. We consider this is an important output, as it allows VBNK to stay in

touch with community concerns and informs the shifts in capacity development services we offer to NGO and Government clients. The next section looks at the kind of results that community conversations can achieve.

What can the community conversation achieve?

Community Conversations draw on a range of participatory activities – café style and small group discussions, visualisation of issues through drawing and role-play and individual journaling – that provide a trigger for open and safe sharing and give individuals confidence to speak up. For participants in the Community Conversation, increased confidence has been the precursor to more equal participation in both family and community lives. In a focus group discussion with a group of older women conducted during the VBNK 2010 annual impact assessment study – a woman from Stoung district in Kampong Thom reflected on her participation in this way:

...I felt that my own knowledge was sufficient compared to the others. This happened when I was in a small group discussion... I could answer some questions. And I heard others listening to me and this allowed me to feel valued. The turning point was the new methods of silent drawing in a group to create a picture and the river of life exercise. The river of life was an entry point for expressing my own history. And a third area was the "Café discussion" where small groups were asked to talk informally to each other about what came to mind. I liked this because I didn't feel on the spot.

Other women participating in the focus group reported that prior to the community conversation they did not have much interest in commune council activities. Instead they preferred to sit back and watch and 'blame' if things were not satisfactory. The community conversation provided them the opportunity to talk with commune councillors in a relaxed setting, and they learned about the commune investment plan and development activities, which required their participation. Now they regularly participate in commune council meetings.

...Now I dare to ask commune councillors about the schedule and agenda of the meetings. I have joined several monthly meetings. I talked about domestic violence and asked the Councillors to put this in the commune investment plan. I also volunteered to help the councillors disseminate information to educate villagers about domestic violence. I am now gaining recognition from the councillors. They often seek my advice and knowledge on women's issues. I have become a focal person in the commune.

A young woman who had participated in the 2010 community conversation described how she had been inspired to take control of her life:

Coming from a poor family I never thought that education had any value for me or for my family. During the Community Conversation I met a lot of people with both high and low levels of education. I heard different types of conversation from educated and non-educated people. We talked about how education is important for Cambodian society. I therefore decided to continue my study. I worked hard to convince my family to support me for study and I am now in year 1 of the midwife programme.

A young man (a youth community volunteer) described how the conversation had pushed him to listen and to think anew.

Through the Community Conversation, I have come to understand more about critical issues that communities are facing and I have thought more about practical solutions, which are concrete and useful for my community. Most importantly, the process helped me to think deeper and to be more critical. This really pushed me hard ...it pushed me further than my current thinking level. This was not been easy for me ...I now realise that this is an important skill for me to develop more in my life

There is also evidence that some participants apply the conversation processes into their work. One man, the Chair of a Community Forestry Committee in Kampong Thom province, described how he had applied his learning and how he is now listening to his community:

The Café conversation brings together people of different backgrounds, ages and educational levels. I tried this method in the community forestry activities, especially the free and open discussions. I have also asked the women in the meetings to voice their opinions. More community members are attending the meetings and give me positive feedback about the value the meetings.

I am using the different facilitation methods ...asking questions and recognising the answers. I learned that it is important to read other people's mind and to understand people's feeling. I applied this in my meetings with members of community forestry and villagers. In so doing, I can find better ways to communicate with them. Now, they trust me and approach me often to share and discuss about forestry issues in the community.

And there are also indications that the conversations contribute to social cohesion and social accountability. In 2011, one woman made the following observation:

"I think that not all Commune Councillors are promoting empowerment. There are gaps. Not all Councillors have a good relationship with citizens...and the citizens do not yet give feedback to the Councillors. Citizens feel that they have raised their needs. However, the Councillors do not respond well or keep citizens informed about decisions and the reasons behind these decisions."

In response a female commune councillor replied:

"I acknowledge that what has been missing from local government so far has been that we haven't given enough information ... citizens have missed opportunities to participate in Commune Council meetings and joint activities with NGOs ... From now, I commit to work with citizens better than before by giving information to them in time."

Obviously more in-depth research is needed, and these self-reported stories needs to be triangulated, to be able to definitively say that the changes highlighted here will sustain over time or that civil-society organisations and Government service providers will ensure their services are responsive and accountable to the needs of community members. As a first step though, it appears that community conversations can lead to a more genuine commitment to listening to one another and to participation by all. We attribute this to two features of the community conversation: first, the conversations build on a strengths-based approach. We always ask, "what's working well", before "what's broken." Second we encourage participants to move away from blaming to making requests of one another and to reaching new agreements. In the 2011 conversation, for example, community members asked the Commune Councillors to give advance notice of meetings and to select more suitable times. A group of NGOs invited public service providers to take part in a training

that they were offering to the community. This offer was accepted. One way we achieve this is to ask participants to consider how they contribute to problems and to keeping things the same. The woman Government official who complained, “it is a man’s world” also noted that women sometimes do not value themselves and give their power over to men.

Sometimes we feel that our ideas are not worth much, so we don’t believe we have much to contribute in meetings about development. But in this meeting people listened when we spoke ...we need to build our skills and confidence.

An older man from the community had this to say about his lack of participation in commune activities:

Usually, we take the easy path ...we like to sit back and watch things happen and then later we complain and criticise the results... we should be more active and join in.

The next section looks at how the facilitation of community conversations has influenced our own action learning.

II. Part two

What challenges us?

The evolving nature of the agenda of community conversations requires flexibility and an ability to step outside one’s comfort zone. This poses major challenges for the facilitator.

- ❑ Committing to identifying community concerns requires that we work with a relatively open agenda. The facilitators cannot anticipate all the issues that arise or the questions asked. They may not know the answer to a particular question. But participants generally come into workshops and meetings expecting the facilitator to take the lead, to respond with answers and to provide solutions. Pushing back and answering questions with questions disturbs the natural order and confounds these expectations. The challenge for the facilitator is to avoid taking on the role of the resource person and to encourage participants to trust in their own strengths and to create their own agenda.
- ❑ Community conversations emphasise interactions that deepen awareness about participation and the responsibility to listen to others and to voice one’s opinions. This requires participants and facilitators alike to commit to a process of co-learning. When confronted with sensitive issues, biases and “blind spots” the facilitator sometimes finds her/himself caught in the middle. In this instance, the facilitator may become aware of her/his own discomfort with the issue. S/he may find her/himself favouring an opinion or siding with a sub-group of participants. Consequently, the facilitator must ‘check’

her/himself and decide on the spot how to keep the conversation going forward, so that the concerns identified are rigorously explored and unpacked. If the facilitator gives in to her/his discomfort or allows the conversation to be steered by a small group then the opportunity is lost.

- ❑ Following on, the facilitator must overcome her/his fear to engage in conversations about sensitive issues and to challenge social norms, beliefs and attitudes that block learning and change. What if the facilitator finds the conversation moving towards issues that s/he is personally struggling with, where s/he lacks the readiness to explore the underlying causes? For example, can a facilitator press participants about gender equity if her/his home environment is gender-skewed? What if the facilitator does not relate to the topics being raised, but merely pretends interest and goes through the motions of being engaged? Thus a commitment to being self-aware and to critically examining her/his own blind spots, and willingness to take risks are essential for the facilitator's own growth.
- ❑ Fourth, a flaw of many workshop processes is that they generate long lists and often overly optimistic statements that only reflect the surface of an issue. For example, in the 2011 community conversation there were countless acknowledgements that communities are involved in commune development planning and that this is an important aspect of democratic development. Yet participants were unable to give specific examples of what made their participation relevant or how well their needs were being addressed through local development activities. As facilitators we are sometimes overly cautious, wanting to maintain a positive and comfortable environment, where participants feel safe. In desiring comfort, the facilitator may fall back on accepting things at face value, and avoid probing beneath the surface. But as Kahane (2004) has noted, organisational and cultural politeness can prevent us from breaking through the patterns of the past to create something new. Consequently, facilitators find themselves navigating participants through rough paths. One choice is to smooth the way: another is to find a way to challenge "too easy" answers without also appearing disrespectful. If the facilitator is too concerned with maintaining harmony at any particular point in the community conversation, then s/he is likely to skate over the difficult issues that need to be surfaced in order to push a conversation forward. A way through this is for the facilitator to select the examples raised by the participants themselves and have the participants explore the driving forces and the constraining factors.

How does a facilitator maintain credibility with a group of participants if she is seen as not knowing, if she allows her/his emotions, biases or blind spots to come into the room, or if s/he challenges

socially accepted behavioural norms? We have adopted a few rules that help us to steer through these dangers. We act as participants. We involve ourselves in the discussion through listening and reacting authentically, but also by sharing our experiences. We challenge the groups with questions to help them deepen their analysis of the issues they identify and the life events they have experienced. We stay aware that this may be discomfiting for ourselves and for others. We facilitate in pairs or a team. While one person is facilitating a discussion, the role of her/his colleague is to observe from a “more distant” place. We use ongoing reflection during breaks and at the end of the day to discuss how we are being affected by any conversation tensions.

Above all managing these dilemmas requires considerable confidence and ‘artful’ facilitation – an ability to simultaneously manage purpose (staying on course to achieve the desired results), to manage process and to manage relationships (with oneself, with the group and within the group). For this reason we regularly set aside time at VBNK for internal learning sessions on self-awareness and on getting in touch with how our attitudes and beliefs hold us back. Through doing so, we recognise our own strengths and reconfirm our commitment to learning and capacity development.

Concluding remarks

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 possibilities, the conversations encourage communities to be confident in their own knowledge and to set their own targets for what is to be achieved. This in turn leads to a more enduring plan for social change.

The community conversation process is replicable across a number of contexts. In Cambodia we have found it a powerful mechanism to break the silence about the recent past and to create new possibilities. Its power is that it provides communities with the space to identify and talk about issues that are important to them and about subjects that may be otherwise silent. Community Conversations are about breaking down hierarchy and promoting equity through open access to information and participation across lines of gender, age, hierarchy and ethnicity. Finding ways to include and involve as many people as possible are a key concern in the process.

Breaking down hierarchy and promoting equity are key drivers in the process, as are the responsibilities of equal access to information and equal participation in the areas of gender, age, ethnicity, and class. We draw on participatory approaches that provide a safe space based on

listening, inclusion, and invitation and building agreements. As much as possible we draw on creative processes (such as drawing, role-play and storytelling) so that those who may not have learned to read can participate equally alongside those who have had the benefit of an education. We stimulate conversations about family and community experiences and cultural meanings. In this way the community conversation strengthens local leadership and contributes to social cohesion.

The open-ended and flexible agenda of the conversation methodology challenges facilitators who must demonstrate their commitment to not direct participants, but to encourage them to own their discussions. This commitment is expressed by taking time to build relationships based on trust, understanding and respect. We are aware too that community conversations demand a complex set of facilitation skills, including listening, patience and flexibility, probing to define factors affecting solutions to a problem, and synthesizing and re-directing information to the participants for their own decision making.

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