



# COMMUNITY CONVERSATION 2011

**How can we work together to ensure that public services meet the needs of citizens and contribute to poverty reduction?**



An institute to serve facilitators of development



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## Acknowledgement

This year VBNK received funding from The Boeing Company. VBNK's annual Community Conversation aligns with Boeing's social investment core focus area, namely to increase the public's understanding of the issues and processes that affect their lives.

Moreover, social investments are a means to encourage engagement and informed discourse about how to make the community better for everyone.

We gratefully acknowledge Boeing's support.

# VBNK COMMUNITY CONVERSATION 2011 REPORT

## How can we work together to ensure that public services meet the needs of citizens and contribute to poverty reduction?

### Background

Each year, VBNK hosts a community conversation that brings together community members from different age groups and life experiences, development practitioners and local authority and government officers to identify and discuss critical social development issues. The 2011 Community Conversation focused on answering an overarching question: How can citizens, NGOs and local government officials work together to ensure that public services meet the needs of communities and also contribute to poverty reduction?

The conversation was conducted over two days (24-25 May 2011) in the northern province of Stung Treng. In all, there were 96 participants (47 women and 49 men) ranging in age from 18 to 64. About half of the participants were between the ages of 30 and 49, nearly 25 percent were 18 to 29 years old, and 27 percent were 50 to 64 years old. The participants included community members (38%), staff of 16 different NGOs (25%), and local Government officials (37%) from Stung Treng and six surrounding provinces – Kampong Cham, Kratie, Mondulakiri, Preah Vihear, Ratanakiri and Siem Reap.



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 – to encourage open and safe sharing. As one young woman from the Khmer Youth Association explained:

*“As a young girl, I feel appreciated and very happy when the elders listen to my ideas.”*

Mar. Doung Pov, Deputy Director of the Provincial Cabinet, speaking on behalf of the Stung Treng Provincial Governor opened the conference by saying: “...the conference encourages participation in our national strategy... civil servants and civil society have important roles to serve citizens... both have to be aware of the perspective and needs of communities... To ensure social accountability, all parties (Government, NGOs and citizens) have to be honest...and contribute to building capacity... e.g. by increasing confidence of citizens to raise their voices, especially of youth and women.”

### The conference flow

We began by asking participants to form province-based groups and create a symbol that represented their province. We then witnessed a series of attractive introductions as the participants acted out their symbols, and asked the audience to recognise the origin of the symbol. For example, the Kampong Cham group presented “two mountains” as their symbol, and Kratie demonstrated “dolphins playing”.

#### *Starting the conversations*

The informality continued after the introductions. Sitting in a large circle participants were asked to tell their “neighbour” about one experience where they had successfully worked with communities, NGOs or local government officials to respond to citizens’ expressed needs. We then asked for volunteers to tell the large group about their successful experiences. The women participants offered to speak out first, and a variety of examples surfaced:

**Community members** spoke about working with teachers to upgrade the quality of primary education; and working together with the Commune Council to deal with gambling in villages.

**NGO workers** told of training citizens about land rights and about facilitating public forums on topics such as health services and civic registration matters.



**Local government officials** described assisting a poor citizen to obtain health services; prioritising with communities their local needs; and mediating on a land issue between a community and a private company.

After this quick sharing of successes, we then wanted to get a deeper sense of what the participants believed. Sitting in three circles of community, NGOs and local government, we asked the group members to stand if they agreed with two statements:

- ↪ Communities have had increased opportunities in the past five years to express their needs through various forms.

Nearly all members of the three groups stood in agreement, citing examples of on-going experiences where Commune Councillors and citizens work together through the commune investment plan process. However, the citizen group explained that, despite these opportunities, many citizens lack understanding of the real intention of participation or the benefits gained from their participation.

There was less agreement for the second statement:

- ↪ The voices of marginalised people are heard and this leads to prioritisation of local social development services.

While the majority of the citizens and local government group members stood up to signal their agreement, the NGO participants disagreed. The NGOs suggested that services provided to marginalised populations are inadequate. They also suggested that a contributing factor is that marginalised people do not come to the planning meetings. "If they attend meetings, then they lose time to earn for their survival." In the discussion that followed, it became apparent that there were differing views on what it means to be marginalised. The prominent view was that being marginalised meant being under-represented.

The NGOs and Government officials said that they worked hard to get citizen participation, but that marginalised people continue to be afraid to express their ideas – to speak to authority. They suggested that this is, in part, due to lack of information and limited understanding of procedures and the regulations/laws that grant them rights to participate.

The facilitation team concluded that the upcoming conversations should encourage deeper probing on what influences participation and decision-making.

### ***What is working well?***

The remainder of Day 1 focused on three questions:

- ↪ What approaches have been used to empower and build the confidence of civil society organisations to participate in and contribute to local council activities?

- ↳ What approaches have been used by citizens to effectively provide feedback on the activities of the local councils and their administrations?
- ↳ What approaches have Commune Councils used to respond to and incorporate the feedback into their development planning?



In their three-circle groups and using a development café process, participants explored different mechanisms that are available to ordinary citizens, whereby they can exercise control over the public processes that impact on their lives. They also explored what encourages citizen engagement in Commune Council activities as well as citizen monitoring of public service delivery.

Overall, each group was able to provide several examples of what had worked well. In so doing they highlighted their respect for two-way communication, for receiving information and for training opportunities that had been provided. They also emphasised the importance of recognising different perspectives and of building up relationships.

**Figure 1: Summary of what is working well**

Citizens . . .	NGOs . . .	Public Service Providers . . .
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation in informal public forums and formal meetings</li> <li>• Participation in commune investment planning</li> <li>• Dissemination of information</li> <li>• Using the social accountability box</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building relationships between citizens and local authorities</li> <li>• Facilitating between communities and public service providers</li> <li>• Initiating ideas and communicating these to citizens and public service providers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organising formal meetings</li> <li>• Attending public forums</li> <li>• Providing information</li> <li>• Ensuring safety to users of the accountability box</li> </ul>

By the end of Day 1, the discussions had highlighted the current situation, namely that Commune Councillors and NGOs remain committed to encouraging participation in development activities. They are working together and approach each other as needed. However, all expressed that there is still insufficient participation from communities.

Citizens acknowledged that gathering information on different perspectives is an effective mechanism for giving feedback. During this community conversation, Commune Councillors heard that they are not giving enough feedback to citizens. They were asked to explain proposed projects more clearly so that community members have a better understanding about what is planned, what the benefits will be and what is expected of them.

## Generating a vision for the future

On day two, the participants continued in the 3-circle groups (citizens, NGOs and local government). Smaller sub-groups then worked together to create a drawing of their vision for the future. They then discussed, with the assistance of the facilitator, what factors would support or hold back their vision becoming real.

Many of the vision drawings illustrated changes in the communes and communities. There was a focus on infrastructure and facilities, better access to public services and positive conditions for improving livelihoods. Afterwards, an NGO staff person commented on the process:



*"I appreciate the methodology of the conference because it is simple but specific. It deepened conversation, which helps active participation. It is a good model for civil society organisations to put into practice in their communities, so that the community will participate fully and contribute to development activities ...I can learn a lot, and I will apply this method in my communities in the future."*

The groups summarised their expectation for the future in this way:

### **As citizens we want to see . . .**

- Local authorities and citizens take responsibility together for quality service delivery – this should include evidence of social accountability of local development programmes.
- Marginalised people have access to information and their voices are heard and responded to.
- People increase a habit and culture of solidarity and good relationships – there is no discrimination in provision of public services.

### **As NGOs we want to see . . .**

- Marginalised populations – for example, people living with HIV/AIDS and widows – have their own representatives.
- NGOs, Communities and Government officials develop mutual understanding and work well together.
- Commune Councils demonstrate social accountability; everyone knows how to use the social accountability box.
- Public service providers respond to the citizens' needs.

### **As local Government (service providers) we want to see . . .**

- Greater cooperation between citizens, NGOs and CCs – they sit together to talk and listen to each other
- They are accountable to each other in commune investment plan planning and implementation.
- Citizens have confidence that their voices are being heard and accepted.
- There is full participation from citizens, CCs and NGOs in commune investment planning.



### Supporting and preventing factors

The drawings and expression of expectations provided the backdrop for groups to discuss the supporting and hindering factors that might impact on their visions. They also discussed what they could do to bring about the desired changes.

**Figure 2: Supporting and blocking factors**

<b>Supporting factors</b>	<b>Resisting factors</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The national policy specifies 5 steps for commune investment planning.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> There are citizen focal points and village volunteers.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> There are on-going experiences applying existing tools and mechanisms for implementation.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Flow of information is facilitated through an increase in local and national level networks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Councillors are not building a shared understanding within the community about development projects.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Not all 5 steps of the commune investment planning are consistently strong – in particular citizens do not get feedback after district integration workshops about why some needs do not get prioritised.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lack of initiative in mobilising people to participate in project activities.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lack of encouragement from “powerful” people.</li> </ul>

### Working together to model and promote social accountability

In the final session, participants addressed the questions: how can we work together to overcome the blocks and achieve what we want? What will we do differently?

*A female NGO worker commented, “It is good to reflect and be able to improve ... I have experienced that whether our work has been good or bad, we did not stop and reflect, we just continued doing our work.”*

Each group committed to two to three actions to carry forward into the future. In general, most actions emphasised changes in personal behaviour, for example, demonstrating more confidence; overcoming reluctance to act; increasing access to information and encouraging feedback; and giving acknowledgement and encouragement rather than blame and criticism.

**Figure 3: Working together**

<b>What will citizens do?</b>	<b>What will NGOs do?</b>	<b>What will public service providers do?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Be brave and actively participate with commune councillors. Dare to ask questions for clarification.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Remind Commune councillors to give citizens information beforehand and find an appropriate time to meet in order to have citizens participate in the activities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Improve cooperation with line departments to work with citizens.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Hold public forums (that include resource persons from Government, CSOs and community) to discuss needs and concerns and to build trust.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Collaborate with government service providers to respond to citizens’ needs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Encourage all ages/actors (citizens, NGOs and Government) to get involved in decision-making processes in development activities.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Be more transparent and accountable by providing information to citizens and NGOs.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Develop relationships with relevant stakeholders.</li> </ul>

In the plenary session the three parties exchanged their views and gave each other feedback on the identified actions. The citizens requested the Councillors to give more advance notice of development activities and choose times when the villagers are not working. The Government group agreed with the request and confirmed their commitment to involve citizens in local activities. The NGOs confirmed their intention to seek more collaboration from technical departments for their specific activities in communities. The Government group, represented by a Deputy Director of Department of Agriculture, reconfirmed the Government's willingness to collaborate and support NGOs.

### Summary of resultsof the conference



The Government's 10-year National Program for Sub-National Democratic Development (NP-SNDD, 2010-2019) is a centrepiece of Cambodia's transition towards democratic governance, and opens up space for the participation of citizens and civil society in public-decision making. There are laws that provide the basis for consultation between government and civil society, and citizens have the legal right to access information about the decisions and actions of the councils.

The two-day community conversation kept three purposes in the forefront of discussions: [How] are the needs of citizens being met? What factors support and challenge development practitioners in promoting social accountability? And what actions can community members, NGOs and local government institutions take to promote social accountability in development?

This community conversation called attention to approaches that are working well and, at the same time, to practices that are not yet widespread. It highlighted an urgent need to support and expand approaches that empower and build confidence amongst civil society organisations so that they can fully engage in and contribute meaningfully to the democratic reform process. Trust and transparency were identified as critical factors in building confidence. As one male participant from the citizen group said:

*"I feel that it is important to have trust and transparency . . . having honest conversations between the Councillors and citizens led all parties to express their concerns and needs and to agree on common solutions."*



By the end of the conversation there were clear expectations expressed by all three groups. One priority is for strengthening the relationship between the local authorities and citizens, as a prerequisite for increasing participation of citizens in the commune investment planning process. Towards this aim, there is also an expectation that (a) the Commune Council meetings should provide the forum where citizens can give and receive feedback; and (b)



Commune Councillors need to be transparent about and clearly communicate what decisions have been taken and why, and also what has been achieved. The NGOs recognised that they too have a responsibility for widely and regularly disseminating information. A Commune Councillor summed up his learning as follows:

*“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.”*

Mr. Doung Pov, a representative of Provincial Governor, commented on the conference results. He noted the enthusiasm all participants demonstrated during the two days. He stressed the significance of citizens, NGOs and local government talking together, listening to each other and finding agreements. This cooperation and openness will be essential for all in the future in supporting the national strategy. In conclusion, he encouraged the participants to return home and tell others about what they had learned and gain their commitment to implement their action plans. He said, *“This conference shows the way for working together ...it proves that citizens have the right to information ...these are the behaviour changes that will make social accountability happen.”*

## What did we learn?

Bringing together citizens, NGOs and local government officials created opportunities to listen to each other’s experiences and perspectives. Over the two days, participants demonstrated a willingness to listen more rather than repeating their own story. Through the process, Commune Councillors and NGOs became more aware of citizens’ needs. There was recognition from both citizens and service providers about the need to focus on service quality, not just on the achievements of material targets. Access to information and being able to freely give and receive were recognised as important requirements.

Citizens spoke openly about uneasiness in the past to express their opinion in the presence of local government officials. They explained that confidence and courage to speak out is not yet widespread. However, events like public forums that bring together citizens, NGOs and local government officials are creating new models for participation. The forums are building trust, which allows participants to speak up about the difficulties they have been facing.

The community conversation helped participants move away from blame, to making requests of one another and to thus reach new agreements. Citizens, for example, 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.

## Conclusions

Three distinct groups – citizens, NGOs and local Government – joined together, spoke out, listened and decided on actions to take forward. The two-days seemed too short to explore all the issues, yet there was enthusiasm and interest all the way to the closing comments. We witnessed how the excitement of the talk carried the participants through a tough afternoon on Day 1, when electricity cuts and a dark and humid conference room challenged everyone. Not to be distracted, the groups moved outdoors to continue their focused conversations. An NGO worker from Preah Vihear Province described his focus as follows:

*“I have never attended this kind of conference with [96 participants] from different generations ...and different actors (citizen, government and NGOs). I am interested in the questions asked about the approaches to giving and receiving feedback from the different stakeholders to ensure social accountability. I have never heard this subject before.”*

There were many optimistic statements during the two days. Sometimes this optimism only reflected the surface of an issue. For example, there were numerous acknowledgements that citizens are involved in commune development planning. At the same time community groups talked about not being fully involved. Participation is obviously integral to democratic development. Yet the majority of the citizen participants were unable to provide specific examples on what made their participation relevant or how well their needs were addressed through the commune development plans. A female Commune Councillor explained the gap as follows:

*“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.”*

But there was also a positive momentum within the participants to continue to move forward.

A commune councillor stated, *“There is an accountability box. When we respond, then there is building up of trust. If we do not respond, then what happens?”*

