COMMUNITY CONVERSATION 2011

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

VBNK

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Acknowledgement

VBNK COMMUNITY CONVERSATION REPORT

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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 we (citizens/ CSO, NGOs and local government) work together to ensure that public services meet the needs of citizens and also contribute to poverty reduction?

The conversation was conducted over two days (24 May and 25 May 2011) in Stung Treng Province. 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 30-49, nearly 25 percent were 18 to 29 years old, and 27 percent were in the elders group (50 to 64 years old). The participants included community members (38%), staff of 16 different NGOs (25%), and local Government officials (37%) from seven provinces – Kampong Cham, Kratie, Mondulkiri, Preah Vihear, Ratanakkiri, Siem Reap and Stung Treng.

The conversations drew on a range of participatory activities to encourage open and safe sharing, including: café style discussions; small group discussions; visualisation of issues through drawing and role play; and individual journaling.

> "I feel very appreciated and happy when adults/elder people listen to my ideas as a young girl", explained a woman from Khmer Youth Association.

The conference was opened by Mr. Doung Pov, Deputy Director of Provincial Cabinet and the representative of Stung Treng Provincial Governor. In his opening remarks, he explained that "this conference encourages participation in our national strategy . . . Based on our policies, civil servants and civil society have important roles to serve citizens ... Both have to be aware of the perspective and needs of community for development ... To ensure social accountability, all parties (Government, NGOs and citizens) have to preserve honesty ... and influence building capacity, e.g. increase confidence to raise voice, especially that of youth and women."

The conference flow

We began the introduction session 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 symbol, 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".

1. Starting the conversations

The informality of the "conference" continued after the introductions. Sitting in a large circle participants were asked to have a brief talk with their "neighbour" and tell about one experience where they had worked with communities/ NGO/ local government officials in responding to citizens' expressed needs.

We asked for volunteers to tell the large group about their successful experience, and the women participants offered to speak out first. A variety of examples surfaced:

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

NGO workers told about training citizens about land rights; 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 telling of successes, we then wanted to get a sense of what the participants believed. Sitting in their circles of community, NGOs and local government, we asked the group's members to stand if they agree 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 – citizens, NGOs and local government - agreed with the statement. The reasoning for agreement was based on ongoing experiences between the Commune Councillors (CCs) and citizens working together through the commune investment plan process. However, the citizen group explained that, despite having increased opportunities, too many citizens lacked an understanding of the real intention of participation and lacked clarity about the benefits from their participation.

The second statement received less consensus on agreement.

> ✍ Marginalised peoples' voice is heard and leads to priorities for local social development services.

A majority of the citizens and local government group members stood up to signal their agreement. The NGO participants disagreed, and explained that services were not sufficiently provided to marginalised groups. They pointed out that a contributing cause was that marginalised people did not come to the meetings. "If they attend meetings, then they lose time to earn for their survival."

In the discussion that followed, two issues became apparent. First, there were differing views on what it means to be a marginalised group. The prominent view was that being marginalised meant being under-represented.

Comments given by NGOs and government expressed that even though they worked hard to get citizen participation, marginalised people still felt afraid to express their ideas to the local authority, because under-represented groups lacked information, and did not understand procedures/ regulations/ laws. Consequently, their voice was not being heard.

The examples raised by participants drew attention to the needs of marginalised groups not being met, since these groups were not fully participating in needs assessments and were not having representation. The facilitation team concluded that the upcoming conversations will encourage deeper probing on what influences participation and decision making.

2. 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 been used by the councils to respond to and incorporate the feedback into their development planning?

The participants continued in three groups – citizens, NGOs and local government – and formed sub-groups where they listened to each other's answers to the questions. We facilitated a development café approach, where the sub-groups re-formed after discussing their answers to questions #1 and #2.

Groups explored different experiences of the mechanisms that are directly available to ordinary citizens to exercise control over the public processes that impact on their lives. They also asked each other what encourages citizen engagement in commune council activities and citizen monitoring of public service delivery.

Overall, each group had several positive examples to describe past successes and satisfaction. Summing up their responses shows that there is respect for having two-way channels for communication; receiving information and having opportunities for training. Moreover, the groups explained the importance of recognising different perspectives and building up relationships.

Figure 1: <u>**Summary of what is working well**</u>

Citizens . . .	NGOs . . .	Public Service Providers . . .
• Participate in informal public forums and formal	• Build relationships between citizens and local	• Organise formal meetings • Attend public forums • Provide information

meetings • Participate in commune investment plan cycle • Disseminate information • Use the accountability box	authorities • Play role as facilitator between communities and public service providers • Initiate ideas and communicate regularly with citizens and public service providers	• Ensure safety to users of accountability box

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

Citizens acknowledged that collecting information on different perspectives is an effective mechanism for giving feedback. During this community conversation, service providers heard from citizens and NGOs that CCs are not giving enough feedback to citizens. CCs were asked to explain proposed projects more clearly so that the community has a better understanding about what is planned, what the benefits will be and what participation is necessary from the community.

3. Generating a vision for the future

Participants continued in groups of citizens, NGOs and local government and formed sub-groups to encourage more participation. Each group created a drawing, and then discussed, with the assistance of the facilitator, what may influence their vision becoming real – and what might prevent it from becoming real.

While working together in the respective sub-groups many of the drawings on vision for the future quickly illustrated changes in the commune and communities, especially the addition of infrastructure and facilities. The groups depicted local scenes with better access to public services and positive conditions for improving livelihood.

> *A NGO worker based in Kampong Cham province said, "I appreciate the methodology of the conference because it is simple but specific. It deepened conversation which is helpful for participants to actively participate. It is a good model for a civil society organisation to put into practice in their community so that the community will participate fully and contribute to the activities ...I can learn a lot, and I will apply this method in my communities in the future."*

The groups were asked to summarise their expectation for the future. Their main comments are:

As citizens we want to see . . .

• local authority and citizens/community taking responsibility together for quality service delivery, which includes evidence of social accountability for local development programmes.
• marginalised people having access to information and their voices being heard and responded to.

- people increasing their habit and culture of solidarity and good relationships and no discrimination in providing and receiving public services.

As NGOs we want to see . . .

- marginalised groups having their own representative, for example, people who have HIV/AIDS, widows.
- NGOs, Community and Government cooperating well.
- Commune Councils demonstrating social accountability and everyone knows how to use the social accountability box. We expect that service providers and users have mutual understanding, and public service providers respond to the citizen's needs.
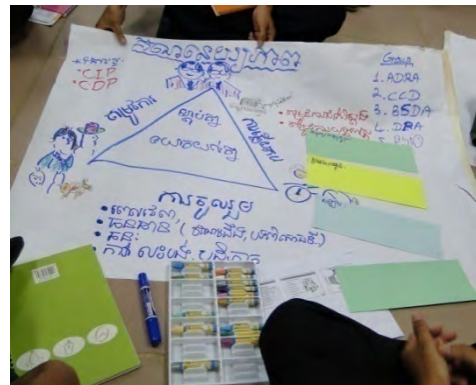
As local Government (service providers) we want to see . . .

- more cooperation between citizens, NGOs and CCs, in terms of sitting, talking, listening and being accountable to each other in commune investment plan planning and implementation. We expect that citizens will have confidence about their voices being heard and accepted.
- in the next 5 years full participation from citizens, CCs and NGOs in commune investment plan implementation.

4. Supporting and preventing factors

The drawings and expression of expectations remained a backdrop to participants' discussions on supporting and hindering factors that have impact on their vision. Each group was asked to explore how present conditions have an influence on their expectations for the future. In particular, they were encouraged to discuss what they are most likely to do on their own. Stipulate

Figure 2: Factors having a positive influence

☐ The national policy specifies 5 steps for the commune investment plan.

☐ There are citizen focal points and village volunteers.

☐ There are ongoing experiences applying existing tools and mechanisms for implementation.

☐ There is an increase of networking at national level and community networking.

During the discussion the facilitators also aided the groups to assess the blocking factors, and ask themselves how they may be contributing to the blockage. Participants were encouraged to move away from blaming others and to look inwards, before looking out.

Figure 3: Gaps and Obstacles (preventing factors)

☐ CCs are not yet giving enough feedback or explaining clearly in order to have common understanding among the community for all projects.

☐ Not all 5 steps of the commune investment planning are consistently strong enough, especially feedback to citizens after district integration workshop about the reasons for some needs not receiving priority by Commune Councillors.

☐ Lack of initiatives in mobilising people to participate in the project.

☐ Lack of encouragement from "powerful" people.

☐ Citizens have a low level of knowledge.

☐ The conventional social and organisational hierarchy limits motivation to speak out.

5. 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 identified two to three actions that they commit to performing into the future. Most of their proposals emphasised a change of behaviour, for example, demonstrating more confidence and overcoming reluctance to act; increasing access to information and encouraging feedback; and giving acknowledgement and encouragement rather than blame and criticism.

Figure 4: Working together

What will citizens do?	What will NGOs do?	What will public service providers do?
☐ Be brave and actively participate with commune councillors. Dare to ask questions for clarification. ☐ Remind Commune councillors to give citizens information before hand and find an appropriate time to meet in order to have citizens participate in the activities.	☐ Improve cooperation with line departments to work with citizens. ☐ Have public forums (that include resource person/ speaker from Government, CSOs and community) to discuss needs and concerns and to build trust in each other. ☐ Collaborate with government service providers to respond to citizens' needs.	☐ Encourage all ages/actors (middle, young and old— citizen, NGOs, Government) to participate and be involved in decision making processes in development activities. ☐ Be more transparent and accountable to citizen and provide information to NGOs and citizens. ☐ Strive to develop relationship with stakeholders concerned.

In plenary session the three parties exchanged their view and gave feedback on each other's plan. The citizen group made a verbal request to councillors to give more advance notice and find appropriate time (when the villagers are not busy with farming activities) to ensure that citizens fully participate and meet and discuss about development activities in their communities. In response the Government group agreed with the suggestion 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 positively responded about Government's willingness to collaborate and support NGOs.

6. Summary of results of 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 – 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: explore how the expressed needs of citizens are being met;   identify major factors that support and challenge development practitioners in promoting social accountability in the community; and describe actions that will influence how individuals (in civil society, NGOs and local government institutions) are taking on and promoting social accountability in development.

This community conversation called attention to approaches that are working well, yet at the same time called attention to practices that are not yet wide spread. There remains an urgency to support and expand approaches that empower and build confidence of civil society organisations to fully engage in and contribute meaningfully to the reform process.

> A male participant from the citizen group said*, "I feel that it is important to have trust and transparency . . . having honest conversations between the CCs and community/citizens led all parties to expressing concerns and needs and finding the common solution."*

By the end of the conversation there were clear expectations expressed by citizens, NGOs and local government representatives. One priority is for citizens' active participation in the commune investment plan process, where citizens want to see a good relationship between the local authority and citizens. Towards this aim, there is an expectation that the Commune office is the place for giving and receiving feedback, where citizens participate in CC monthly meetings, and they ask questions and give feedback. The expectation is also that CCs will give consistently transparent

information about their process for decision making and what was done in the activity. Moreover, the expressed expectations stressed the importance given by all to giving and receiving feedback. In addition, the NGOs voiced that they have a responsibility for disseminating information widely and regularly.

> *A Commune Councillor summed up, "... I acknowledge that the missing point from the local government so far has been that we haven't given enough information ... citizens missed opportunities to participate in CC 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, the representative of Provincial Governor, commented on the conference results. He expressed his awareness about the enthusiasm all participants demonstrated during the two-day conversations. He stressed the significance of citizens, NGOs and local government talking together, listening to each other and finding agreements. This cooperation and openness in talking and listening is what will be essential for all in the future to do and support 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 the action plan. He said, "This conference shows the way for working together . . . it proves that citizens have the right to information . . . there is changing behaviour that will make social accountability happen."

What did we learn?

The community conversation provided a structure to make it easier for participants to speak out, starting with what is going well, so that everyone could identify with a positive experience. This also encouraged participants to feel safe and comfortable to speak out. By emphasizing the positive, they acknowledged their own existing strengths. Moreover, bringing together citizens, NGOs and local government officials created opportunities to listen to the experiences and perspectives of others. Over the two-days, participants demonstrated a willingness to listen more rather than repeating their own story.

CCs and NGOs became more aware of citizen's needs. Listening to the discussions, we heard that both citizens and service providers recognized that citizen needs include service quality, not just the achievements of material targets. They explained that service quality includes the way they receive and give feedback, and have access to information (information board, CC meetings, accountability box). This quality leads to better understanding of each other.

We observed that the discussions focused more on giving examples of behaviours rather than describing activities and tasks. For example, citizens spoke openly about uneasiness in the past to express their opinion when there is the presence of local government officials. They explained that confidence and courage to speak out is not yet widespread, however events like public forums are creating new models for participation.

During the two days we often heard participants speak about public forums. In these events, citizens, NGOs and local government joined together. Those who participated explained that the public forums have been providing opportunities for building trust. They appreciated that participants speak up about the difficulties they have been facing. However, they acknowledged that all sides are not yet consistently asking for what information they want in their hands and what information is essential to be disseminated to others.

We also listened to the different sides using the community conversation to reach new agreements. For example, citizens explained that their participation in CC's meetings and other events was limited due to communication. They asked that the CC give more advance notice and find more suitable scheduling. The CC representative agreed that CCs must be more responsive to citizens' availability. Another noteworthy agreement was the offer by NGOs to invite public service providers to take part in training that they were offering to the community. This offer was accepted. We believe that the community conversation provided the open space for participants to feel at ease and openly speak about issues and reach new conclusions.

Conclusions

Three distinct groups – citizens, NGOs and local Government – joined together, spoke out, listened and decided on their actions to take forward. The two-days seemed not to have enough time to explore all the issues, yet there was enthusiasm and interest all the way to the closing comments. We even witnessed how the excitement of the talks carried the participants through a tough afternoon on Day 1, when the participants and facilitators were challenged by the disruption of electricity, and a dark and humid conference room. Not to be distracted the groups moved outdoors to continue their focused conversations.

> A NGO worker from Preah Vihear Province expressed, *"I have never attended this kind of conference with a lot of people (96 participants) from different generations (old, middle and young) and different actors (citizen, government and NGOs). I am interested in the three questions asked about the approaches to giving and receiving feedback from 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 was only reflected at the surface of the issues. For example, there were countless acknowledgements that citizens are involved in commune development planning.

While this is an important aspect of democratic development, a majority of the citizen participants were not giving specific examples on what made their participation relevant to their needs, and how well their needs were affected by implementation of the plans. Often, the references to actual experience neglected to include the frequency of the incident and who was directly involved.

> *"I think that not all CCs are building empowerment, there are gaps,"* explained a female commune councillor. *"All CCs do not yet have a good relationship with citizens...and the citizens do not yet give feedback to CCs. Citizens think that they raised their needs, however CCs do not well enough respond and keep citizens informed about decisions and the reasons".*

The conversations encouraged all concerned to express their opinion, especially to point out concerns about continuing to move forward in a positive direction.

> 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*?"

VBNK
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