

# COMMUNITY CONVERSATION 2014



**Constructive Engagement in Democratic  
Processes**



Facilitating Learning and Capacity Development



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## Acknowledgement

EED provided fund support to VBNK to conduct 3 years program on Leadership Development (2013-2015). VBNK annual Community Conversation in 2014 aim to provide a forum where local communities, civil society (organizations in LDP group) and local authorities have been talking and sharing (talking) about the meaning and importance of the participant's citizens in the decision-making beverages affect their families and communities.

We gratefully acknowledge EED's support.

# VBNK COMMUNITY CONVERSATION 2014 REPORT

## Constructive Engagement in Democratic Processes

### 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 2014 Community Conversation focused on answering an overarching question: How can citizens, NGOs and local authority work together to ensure the constructive engagement in democratic processes.

The conversation was conducted over three days (13-15 Oct 2014) at Reaksmeay Battambang Hotel, in Battambang province. In all, there were 102 participants (64 women and 38 men) ranging in age from 18 to 70. 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 70 years old. The participants included community members (42%), staff of 15 different NGOs (38%), and local authority (20%) from Battambang, Kampong Cham, Takeo, Banteay Meanchey, Svay Rieng, Prey Veng, Pursat, Kondal and Phnom Penh.



Community Conversations draw on a range of participatory activities – café discussion style and small group discussions, visualisation of issues through drawing and role-play and individual journaling – to encourage open and safe sharing. As one man from the NAK AKPHIVATH SAHAKUM explained:

*“I appreciate with methodologies used in this community conversation as people have opportunity to talk freely from their heart about what problem that they have in community and trying to solve together with authority and NGOs no need to think of protocol style. I will apply this method in my communities in the future.”*



H.E. Buth Kimsean, Deputy Director of the Provincial Cabinet, speaking on behalf of the Battambang 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 and engage in participation, especially of vulnerable people.”

### 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 Battambang demonstrated “Dombong Kronhoung status”.

### *Drawing their vision for future*

The informality continued after the introductions. Participants were asked to work in three groups (CSO, Local authority, and citizen) to draw future image of an ideal situation that represent about how will the society be like when the citizen are actively and fully engage in decisions that affect quality of life of their families and community. We then asked for volunteers to present their result in plenary, then a variety of examples surfaced:

**Community members** spoke about what they want to see in the future for their community. They wish to have discussion and explanation on community development, participated from citizen and other institutes/private sector in health care service education, include marginalised people's problem into community development plan, people have high knowledge and could improve their living condition, for any construction or development should have holistic thinking and possible payback for any damage.




**Local authority** valued the citizen' participation in community activities, so that authority often discussed and collected all the ideas from citizen for better decision making, built relationship with NGOs and community people, encouraged to have more participated from other institutes and provided birth certificate to all children for school registration.

**NGO workers** raised that commune headquarter is the best place for meeting and discussing for any topic. NGOs worked with local authority to create more opportunities such as regular learning forum for commune people to share their idea, needs and problem and also to receive feedback from vulnerable people. NGOs acted as a messenger from citizen to local authority in national and sub national level as well as have to follow up all the promises from authority and risk the idea to update public law for all people not only for individual.



The results that the groups found were similar. They wish to see marginalised group is brave enough to share idea, safety to receive education and appropriate living standards, more health care services, land rights, social equity, put their issue into community development plan. Moreover, skilful doctors with good morality in every health care centre, improve quality of education, enough electricity to use with acceptable price, reduce tree cutting, more productivity in agriculture, big market for farmers' production, good infrastructure (slops for disable people everywhere) and safety village (prevention on drugs, domestic violence, HIV/AIDs).





Check in/out helped participants to express their interesting points, new learning that they got from the community conversation conference as well as clarification about their unclear/concern related to the issues of discussion. As a result, most of the participants expressed that they were of their participation in social development especially to reflect on what they have done so far in engaging themselves in democratic processes. For example, Mr. Toch Vanthorn a community member in Svay Rieng expressed that:

*“I would like to express my thankfulness to VBNK for creating this community conversation event. It helped people to reflect on the expectation in community that we are as community citizens, NGOs and local authority want to see. It would be my pleasure if community could achieve what we have planed”.*

### **Deeply conversation**

To get deeper discussion on day 2 of conference, we asked participants to discuss freely in a group of people who came from the same sector, i.e.; Community, NGOs, and local authority. This method named “ Café discussion”. We then moved participants to discuss in mix group of them as the second round café discussion. The question was asked participants to discuss is “Do you agree OR disagree to the statement below:

☞ “Women and men, youth and elders (include Marginalised peoples), at community level, have increase opportunity to be involve with decisions that affect their families and communities”, in the past recent years through various forms. E.g. Opportunities to comment and inform CDP/CIP.

The results were reported as the following:

#### **Agreed (most focus on quantities):**

- There were laws and Prokas about the rights of participation
- Women have role and responsibilities in legislatives institutes (national assembly and senate), law executive (ministry, departments, police, army...), and justice institute.
- Commune Committees for Women and Children (CCWC), national authority of people with disability and youth association were created
- Public forum for community people
- Participated in community development plan process
- Accountability box and information board in community

#### **Disagreed (Most focus on Qualities):**

- Have only role abut no power in decision making (for women)
- There were meeting and collecting idea but no any responding activity
- Follow the instruction from top leader but not consider the real situation in community
- Community development plan gave priority to the majority voice, some issues of disable people did not solve
- Lack of strategic in collecting and responding feedback from community
- Nepotism and political pressure

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

## Methods of engagement

The conversation took an appreciative inquiry approach to explore the method used by local authority and NGOs to empower the community people to participate and influence on development activities in community. Below questions were used to have discussion among participants:



↪ **For Community:** What approaches and methods, have been used by local authority and CSO, are most likely to empower the community people to participate and influence on development activities in communities?

↪ **For Local Authority:** What approaches do local authorities used to empower the community people to participate and influence on development activities in communities?

↪ **For CSO:** What approaches have been used by civil society organisations to empower the community people to participate and influence on development activities in communities?

In plenary each groups shared their output and we allowed for questions to clarify and added up for comment from all participants. Below were the common and the differences raised by the participants.

### Commonality

- ❖ Created public forum
- ❖ Built close relationship with citizen (ask for their needs)
- ❖ Shared information for example: law, principles and community development plan
- ❖ Shown the reasons of participation in community development
- ❖ Supported and received feedback, problems, needs that people risked
- ❖ Responded on priority issue
- ❖ Field visited for sharing experiences

### Differences:

Citizens . . .	NGOs . . .	Local authority...
<input type="checkbox"/> Form community network (self help group, production group) <input type="checkbox"/> Appreciate for all the outputs from community	<input type="checkbox"/> Keep in contact with local authority in sharing community development plan <input type="checkbox"/> Provide capacity building, skills and facilitate people in sharing idea <input type="checkbox"/> Provide regular coaching and consultation services <input type="checkbox"/> Provide loan for small business (without interest rate)	<input type="checkbox"/> Coordinate the place and give priority people in participating to risk their needs and other issues <input type="checkbox"/> Provide opportunity to people in sharing feedback through monthly meeting in commune <input type="checkbox"/> Sharing and writing information on white board about annual development plan in community

The discussion had highlighted the current situation, namely that local authority and NGOs remain committed to encourage participation in development activities. They were working together and approach each other as needed. Local authorities raised that some priorities issue in community were solved. Whereas citizens acknowledged that gathering information from different perspectives is a mechanism for giving and receiving feedback. However, all expressed that there is still insufficient participation from communities.

*“Local authority should accept and solve all the problems raised by community citizens, not just only the priority one. In addition, authority should announce to community whether when their issues would be solved to make people have more confident, hopeful and trust on local authority” said by Mr. Keo Kosal, Kompong Cham Citizen.*

### **Support and Hider Factor of engagement**

Role play was conducted by the group of participants to express the block and help factor to meaningful engagement in decision that affect the quality of life of their families and community. We divided participants to work in 6 small groups (mix participants). 3 groups worked on hinder factor and other 3 worked on help factor.

For supporting factors, they focused on 1) good cooperation/relationship and willingness to participate from all stakeholders, i.e.; NGOs, local authority and citizen themselves 2) Self-sacrifices of time and/or money contribution in the development activities in community

For hinder factors the role play groups mentioned about non safety village, nepotism, lack of willingness in participation, no transparency, not clear plan for community development, weakness of information sharing and no delegating authority of decision making.



In plenary, all the participants expressed the most interesting points about sharing information on time in order to get understanding each other well and cooperation.

*..... “There will be a meeting in Phnom Penh which all authorities will come together. I will bring what I have heard in this conference especially the concern raised by communities to sub national level to be considered and trying to find solution for community on time.” ....said by a female local authority in Phnom Penh.*

In addition, Mr. Preap Ly community member at Prey Veng committed that..... *“I acknowledged that before some community members rarely participated in community development process with local authority even they tried to suggest having more participation. The reason is because that the citizens are not yet clear about community development plan. I commit myself to involve in the process of CIP/CDP with my local authority so that my community development goal will be achieved”.....*

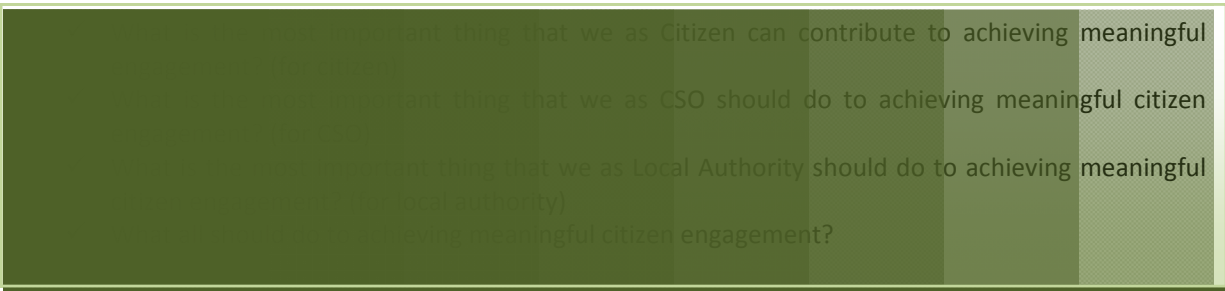
**Supporting and blocking factors**

From Community	Supporting factors	Hindering factors
From local Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sharing information and encourage others to participate in any forum</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Willingness to participate not only depend on encouraging stuff</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Well organised, listen and provide opportunities to people in sharing idea</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Using soft words and good relationship</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ask for solution and clarification</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Always blamed from authority</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> No willingness to participate, need encouraging stuff (gift, money...)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> No sharing information to other people in community</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Messy (not well organised)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Using bad words to each other (authority and commune members)</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Clear plan (CIP), participated from all stakeholders and wise information sharing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Seeking for more support from NGOs</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Well organised for other events (forum), enough time, pre inform to all people</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Clear agenda for discussing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Use gentle words, patience and make sure with citizen</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Collect all feedback (before forum), listen to citizens' idea/feedback (during forum)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Seeking for agreement from all participants at the end of each meeting</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Consult with expert or stakeholder to find solution for community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Plan is not clear, not fully participated from all stakeholders, hidden some information</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> No clear responsible, rights and resources</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Not well organised for any forum, prepare in last minute (not enough time for meeting), no pre inform to all people</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Nepotism</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lack of willingness to participate</li> </ul>

***Working together to promote social accountability and engagement in democratic processes***

The last step of the community conversation is to plan for the future in order to have fully and quality engagement in decision process that affect the citizen life and their community. The questions below guided participants to think of what they will exactly doing in contribution to achieving meaningful engagement:





The below is their commitment to apply what they have learnt from this conference:

What will citizens do?	What will NGOs do?	What will public service providers do?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Propose to my community in sharing the knowledge in this conference to other people</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> commit to participate in every activities of my commune</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Before I had lack understanding of democratic processes. As a citizen I must daring to seek for all problems happen in community and propose to authority to find solution.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Form community network for sharing idea and experience in meeting at least once per month.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> As NGO worker, I commit to share knowledge from this conference to my target partners for working with community.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Increase more discussion on citizen's goal and objectives to solve the problem</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Transparency and accountability work</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Include simple and useful methods in democracy process to have more participation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Encourage local authority to facilitate with citizen and supported from NGO</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Collaborate with NGOs and other stakeholder in order to respond to citizen's needs</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> On time information sharing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Provide space and opportunity to marginalised people</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Create more public forums in every 6 months for meeting with marginalised group and find the solution to issues risked</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Build close relationship with all stakeholders</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> No discrimination especially for political trend</li> </ul>

In general, most actions emphasised changes in personal behaviour, for example, demonstrating more participation in democratic processes; increasing access to information, sharing those information that they got from this conference to other people in community, build close relationship to all stakeholders and giving acknowledgement and encouragement rather than blame and criticism.

**Summary of results of the conference**

The Government's 10-year National Program for Sub-National Democratic Development (NP-SNDD, 2010-2019) is a centre piece 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 three-day community conversation kept three purposes in the forefront of discussions: How will the society be like when the citizen are actively and fully engage in decisions that affect quality of life of their families and communities? What are the approaches/methods have been use to empower the community people to participate and influence on development activities in the community? What are the support and hider factors to meaningful engagement? And what is the most important thing that we can contribute to achieve meaningful engagement?

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.

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 local authority meetings should provide the forum where citizens especially marginalised group can give and receive feedback; and (b) local authority 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 local authority summed up her 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 Community meetings and joint activities with NGOs ... From now, I commit to work with citizens better than before by giving information to them in time.”*

Most of participants indicated in their evaluation that this conference is really useful to encourage participation in democratic processes. The engagement is requires cooperation from all parties especially community members to involve in decision making and sharing support as needed. Citizen group hope that the result of this conference will share to their community then local authority would do something in order to respond to citizen need in community development.

Moreover, there is also an appreciation on facilitators’ performance. Some participants cited that facilitators tried very hard to explain clearly the instruction of doing each work to all participants when they have doubt especially in small group discussion.

Participants also suggested having this kind of conference again by involving from various authorities in other provinces so that they can share more experiences and bringing back the result to sub and national level to develop community based on citizen needs.