

# Partnering for Change



## Successes, Challenges and Lessons Learned

ICCO PARTNERS PROJECT  
2005–2008



An institute to serve facilitators of development



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## LIST OF PARTICIPATING PARTNERS

Cambodian Health Education Development: CHED

Cambodian Volunteers for Society: CVS

Cambodian Social Economic Development & Democracy Association: CSDA

Fisheries Action Coalition Team: FACT

Gender and Development for Cambodia: GAD/C

Islamic Local Development Organisation: ILDO

Khmer Rural Development Association: KRDA

Krom Akphi Wath Phum: KAWP

Legal Aid of Cambodia: LAC

MEDICAM: a membership organisation for NGOs and other agencies working in the health sector

Minority Organisation for Development of Economy: MODE

National Center of Disabled Persons: NCDP

Project Against Domestic Violence: PADV

SABORAS: Generous

Salvation Center Cambodia: SCC

Social Services of Cambodia: SSC

Tek Dey Sovan Phum: TDSP

Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation: TPO



ICCO is the Dutch inter-church organisation for development cooperation. The organisation's mission is to work towards a world in which people live in dignity and prosperity, a world where poverty and injustice are no longer present. They work to achieve the mission by giving financial support and advice to local organisations and networks across the globe that are committed to providing access to basic social services, bringing about fair economic development and promoting peace and democracy. ICCO has been actively supporting development organisations in Cambodia since 1988.



VBNK is an institute to serve facilitators of development. Its mission is to be a centre of learning, working creatively with the Cambodian social development sector in order to generate and share innovative practice, knowledge and wisdom that will contribute to positive social change. VBNK provides a range of learning and organisational development services to clients working in the social development sector.

# THE ICCO PARTNERS PROJECT



Since 1988 ICCO has been supporting NGOs in Cambodia with core funding, including support for organisational and staff development needs. In 2004 they had 22 Cambodian and 2 international partner NGOs, located in North Western provinces and Phnom Penh. A review of the Cambodian partners' capacity undertaken by an ICCO capacity building advisor showed that many had significant areas of weakness in basic and essential aspects of operational and organisational management. He concluded that ICCO's previous budget support approach to capacity building had not resulted in significant expansion of capacity. ICCO therefore decided to explore different options for building the capacity of their partners.

Financial management was the priority issue and ICCO hired a consultant to begin work with 10 partners. His detailed assessment results provided important information about both financial management capacity and linked areas such as organisational structure, management and governance. ICCO then approached VBNK about developing a strategic, long-term and systematic approach to building the capacity of their partners. All Cambodian partners were invited to undertake a participatory organisational assessment process and 15 accepted the invitation. ICCO told partners that participation in the assessment and any resulting activities would be voluntary and not a condition of funding support.

The results of the organisational assessments were used to design the core stage of the project, key features of which were: two distinct strands of capacity building activities (development management and financial management); individual learning objectives for each organisation; learning, creativity, facilitation and coaching as the central approaches to capacity development; a structured programme of monthly two-day interventions tailored to the needs of each individual partner; and, regular opportunities for all partners to share learning and experiences together.

This was an ambitious undertaking as all 15 partners who went through the assessment chose to participate in the ongoing project, and a further three opted to participate in the financial management strand only. VBNK created a team of experienced staff able to cover the identified needs, the most significant of which were: resource development; legal basis and governance; strategic planning; staff performance; monitoring and evaluation; and, leadership, management and decision-making. Expectations between ICCO, VBNK and the partners were clarified before the core intervention phase began. The most important expectations were that VBNK would provide effective responses to needs so weaknesses would be overcome and capacity would be built, and that VBNK would be transparent about assessments; that there would be good participation and sharing, based on trust and honesty in relationships; that partners would be committed and willing to learn and change; and that ICCO would continue funding and resource support. An outcome of the expectations exercise was that VBNK's reporting to ICCO was to be anonymous so that partners could feel more confident to discuss their problems and weaknesses with the VBNK team.

VBNK and ICCO agreed at the start that, as the project's approach to organisational capacity building was unique in Cambodia, learning should be built into all aspects of the project so that it could later be shared with others. The team therefore documented all their activities and their regular reviews of the work with partners to identify the emerging learning and find ways to apply it to the ongoing activities. The pages that follow set out not only the project framework and activities, but also the successes, challenges and lessons learned, together with a summary of the findings of the external evaluation conducted at the end of the project.

# PROJECT PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES



## Purpose:

To strengthen the organisational capacity and management of the ICCO partner organisations in order to strengthen their ability to deliver programmes that achieve positive impact.

## Objectives:

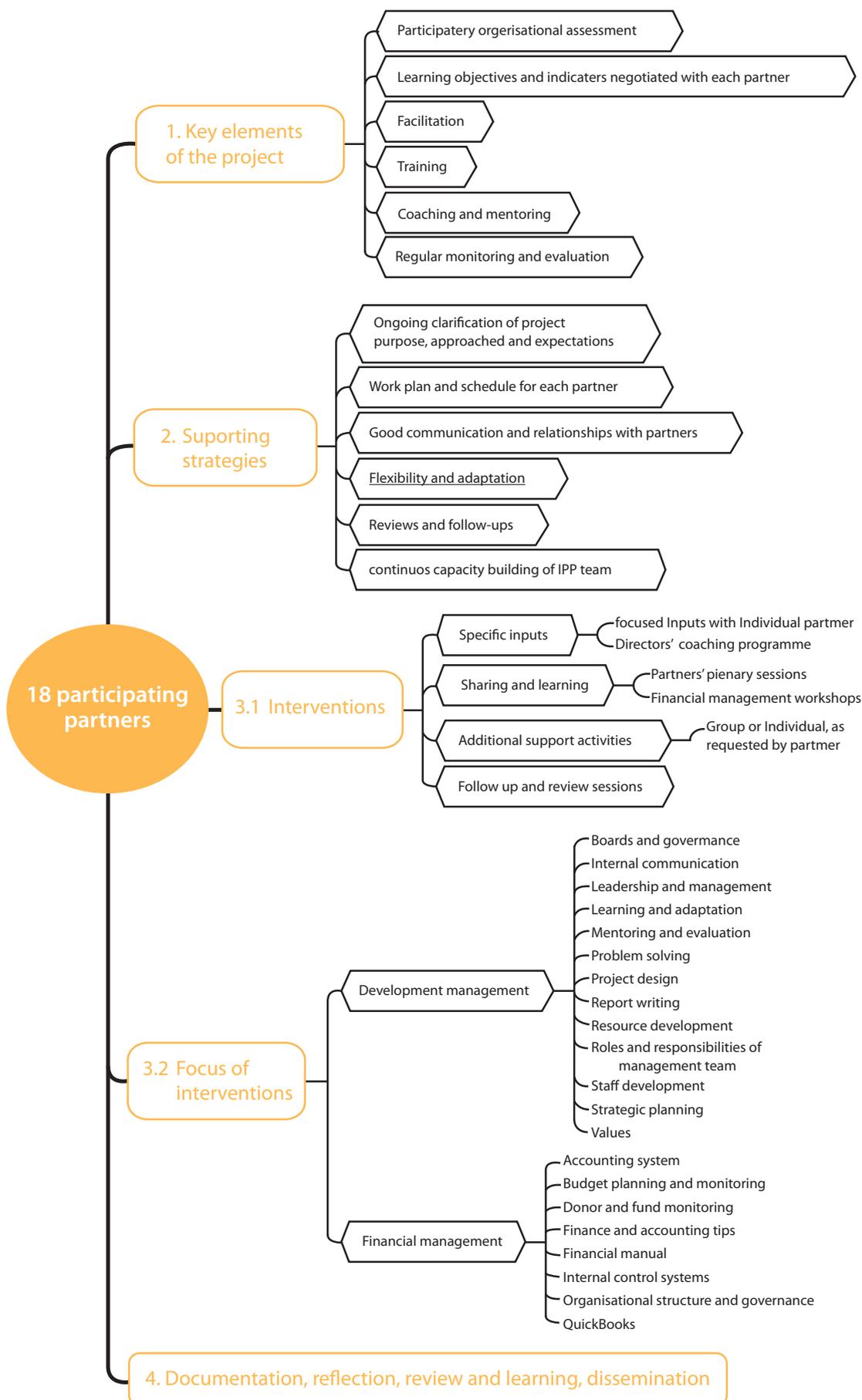
By the end of the project the participating ICCO partners will have:

- ❑ The capacity to manage and report on their finances in a sound and consistent manner which both helps them manage their activities more effectively and fulfils external requirements for good practice standards.
- ❑ Strengthened their organisational capacity and management in line with their own assessment of needs in areas agreed with ICCO and VBNK at the start.

‘Before the IPP I worked with my eyes closed, now I work with my eyes open.’

FM participant

# ICCO PARTNERS PROJECT OVERVIEW



# SUCCESSSES



Delivery of a wide range of capacity development interventions over four years to more than 280 staff in 18 different organisations. Each intervention was tailored, using different methodologies, to each individual organisation's needs, abilities and current realities. Some concrete outcomes of these interventions are:

- 15 of the partners who participated in the financial management strand have now installed and use QuickBooks, have accounting systems and a financial manual in place, and have improved their internal control systems
- Staff in most organisations are applying newly-acquired skills to prepare and monitor budgets and grant funding
- Partners have revised policies and operational guidelines for a range of organisational and operational needs, which reflects both new understanding of good practice and their enhanced performance
- Partner staff have improved skills and confidence to do their jobs, and improved communications skills within and outside their organisations. Improved relationships and communication between finance and programme departments within organisations has led to a reduction in misunderstanding and conflict in the application of financial procedures
- Several partners now have strategic plans to guide organisational growth and decision making

The investment of time at the beginning of the project supported the establishment of good relationships and trust between the partners' staff and the IPP team, which enabled strong participation, and open and honest sharing, in project activities. A linked issue was the need for the team to respond flexibly in adapting plans when scheduling challenges arose or it was necessary to respond to emerging or changing needs. Additionally events such as the plenary sessions helped to build good relationships between partners, which enabled the sharing of best practices and lessons learned.

Capacity building through learning is now seen by many of the partners as an important long-term strategy, and some have integrated it into their strategic plans or have adopted learning as an organisational value. Organisations understand that individual and organisational development through learning will both improve the quality of programme delivery and contribute to long-term sustainability.

There is evidence from some partners that their experience of being in a facilitated learning process during IPP activities has changed their own practice of facilitation in their work with communities.

Within VBNK the experiences of, and learning from, IPP activities have contributed to learning throughout the organisation, and are now being applied to capacity building work with other organisations.

# CHALLENGES



The involvement of directors and other senior leaders was a challenge in a number of ways. In some organisations even where the capacity of staff was developed changes did not happen, because directors would not support implementation of learning or allow change. Some leaders did not participate because they feared that the IPP approach might expose their weaknesses and they would lose face. In other cases the director's participation seemed to inhibit staff from contributing their ideas.

Despite careful joint planning for activities between the IPP team and the partners scheduling challenges occurred regularly as partners met new demands on their time, such as unexpected donor meetings. The IPP team needed to be flexible as they were often asked to reschedule or cancel planned activities. Workload demands stopped some staff participating in activities according to plans. Doing the interventions in the workplace also meant participants were often distracted and absent from the sessions.

Staff turnover in some partner organisations required frequent revision of work previously completed and some interventions had to be repeated. Unfortunately, there was not always time available to repeat an intervention in which cases new staff were at a disadvantage.

In some partners it seemed that key senior staff cared more about funding than learning and their attention was focused on finding new donors. This was highlighted when ICCO announced that due to its own strategic programme changes funding for most of the partners in the project would not be renewed after current contracts expired.

Some participants were resistant to change. The participatory nature of the project activities often challenged prevailing assumptions about how to learn and expectations that the IPP team were the experts who would provide the right answers. At times it was difficult for the facilitators to overcome these assumptions and expectations and stay with the planned process. Where the participants were new to being in facilitated processes some found it difficult to participate fully and contribute their own ideas. Another example of resistance was that some participants found it difficult to leave the comfort zone of their old habits, especially when it involved introducing new systems.

Different donor requirements mean that some organisations with multiple donors require multiple systems for accounting and reporting. Partners are not always strong enough to deal with this and make the appropriate adaptations to their systems.

There were changes in the IPP team during the project which created some problems with continuity for partners.

**'When you keep learning, success takes care of itself'**

**DM participant.**

# LESSONS LEARNED



The commitment of both the whole organisation and individuals, especially the leadership, is necessary for change to happen

- The commitment, of both the whole organisation and individuals, to learning and change is essential to the success of a project of this nature. Most importantly the director's participation and support is necessary for changes to be implemented. The commitment and involvement of directors and other senior leaders proved to be a key factor in determining how successful the project was within each participating organisation. Where directors did not change their leadership style and approach, the staff whose capacity had been built in the project lost motivation. This resulted in staff turnover and little overall organisational change. In organisations where there is nepotism, new policies were developed but remained a paper exercise that did not contribute to any real change.

Good relationships and trust are essential to success

- Good relationships and trust between the partners and the IPP team were essential for interventions to be effective. The facilitators needed to take time to build trust before the participants could feel safe. Once in place the relationships and trust supported clear communication, openness to capacity building and willingness to change.

Setting and reviewing clear learning objectives and indicators enhances the learning process

- Establishing clear learning objectives and indicators at the start, and reviewing them regularly, is a very helpful mechanism not only for monitoring, but also, when a review shows that progress is being made, for building confidence within the organisation. They also enable good planning for the next round of activities. Partners with whom it had not been possible to agree clear learning objectives and indicators at the start of the project appeared to have less commitment and lower levels of participation.

'No animal runs into the mouth of the sleeping tiger.' (The tiger needs to go and catch the animal if it wants to eat, which is like learning and change, we have to be proactive and start with ourselves.)

DM participant.

## Facilitation and coaching are highly effective methods to support learning and change

- While training is the right approach for some needs, facilitation and coaching methods, linked to learning by doing opportunities, are most effective in helping participants to learn, improve their skills and gain confidence. The use of needs assessments and coaching conversations gave the facilitators detailed information about real workplace needs, which enabled them to design their interventions, drawing on a range of training, facilitation and coaching approaches, as appropriate to each situation.

## Follow up support is essential to the implementation of learning

- After each training session the facilitator needed to work directly with participants on their workplace application. Follow up coaching activities included helping to schedule implementation steps, getting participants to finish assignments on time, and checking on the application of knowledge in their work. Coaching sessions also provided good opportunities to monitor progress against objectives and indicators.

## Plenary sessions support organisational development changes

- The plenary sessions both enhanced personal relationships among the partner group and contributed significantly to organisational development through means such as review of subjects already covered; the formal and informal sharing of experience, ideas and practice; the introduction of new concepts and information; and by highlighting issues of common concern. Using plenary sessions for review of objectives, indicators and achievements was also helpful for formulating future strategies.

'I like the process and I try to learn from the VBNK team here. If you look at the content, it's the same everywhere, but if you look at the process, VBNK is very different. We had all the information, but VBNK helped us pull it all together and use it with our work in the field. This is the benefit of VBNK IPP'

DM participant

'Our director did not participate.... There were many topics we learnt such as leadership and management, team building, problem solving, which... we expected would help to solve our internal problem between the management and the implementing level, unfortunately it didn't change.'

Former employee from IPP partner organization



# SELECTED FINDINGS FROM THE EXTERNAL EVALUATION REPORT – OCTOBER 2008



## Organisational transformation requires a systems approach.

The findings of the end-of-project evaluation support an underlying principle of the IPP - that training alone will not provide lasting organisational change. Rather, capacity development is dependent upon a complex set of interdependent factors. Taking a holistic approach to the capacity development needs of an organisation requires a greater level of investment than is normally called for in more traditional approaches to capacity building, such as sending one or two members of staff to an external training programme.

## Organisational readiness is the primary indicator of future success and leadership determines organisational readiness.

Throughout the evaluation examples of the lack of organisational readiness were cited as the cause of poor performance. Organisational readiness is primarily determined by the actions of the organisation's director. Reliable indicators of the level of change that is possible within an organisation are the director's understanding of the change process, demonstrated willingness to allocate resources, desire to participate in the Project activities and commitment to implementing the Project's initiatives.

## Engaging with resistance is critical to success.

Resistance manifested in many forms in the IPP and the holistic approach helped to confront beliefs about capacity building and challenge long-held cultural norms and expectations about learning. Only when a foundation of understanding and trust are developed will shifts in attitudes and behaviour happen that support a commitment to the change process. Further, building understanding and trust is not a one-off event, but a process that must be maintained throughout.

'Before I used to think that accounting work was easy, but now I know that accounting follows a specific set of rules and techniques, not just plus and minus.'

FM participant

### The skilful use of a participatory assessment tool supports the development of understanding.

The Organisational Scanning Tool (OST) was useful in supporting the development of awareness and understanding, and in building dialogue and trust. The OST opened up conversations about various aspects of an organisation, many of which usually remain beneath the surface.

### A holistic approach to capacity building requires a specialized team.

Delivering on the complexities entailed in providing a holistic approach to organisational capacity building requires a specialized team with diverse skills and knowledge.

### An important strength of the IPP was that it was created and implemented by VBNK's Cambodian staff with only limited expatriate support.

The Project encouraged both facilitators and participating partner staff to develop their own confidence and to create solutions that work in the Cambodian context, reducing a cultural barrier to change so prevalent in expatriate driven agendas. There are lessons here for all development practitioners about how they can provide opportunities and support to Cambodian run projects that lead to local solutions to capacity development.

### It is difficult at this point to document the full impact of the project but it has provided a wealth of new learning.

The ICCO Partners Project required the participating partners to make a greater level of commitment than is usually called for in more traditional approaches to capacity building. But for those organizations capable of making those commitments, sustainable improvements in key organizational areas were possible. IPP also improved the confidence, capacity and skills of many individuals. In order to fully and accurately assess the effectiveness of the IPP and the investment associated with it, it is necessary to include both individuals and the larger social development sector in future evaluations. The ultimate impact of the ICCO Partners Project would be more accurately assessed with the allocation of resources to conduct a follow-up study.

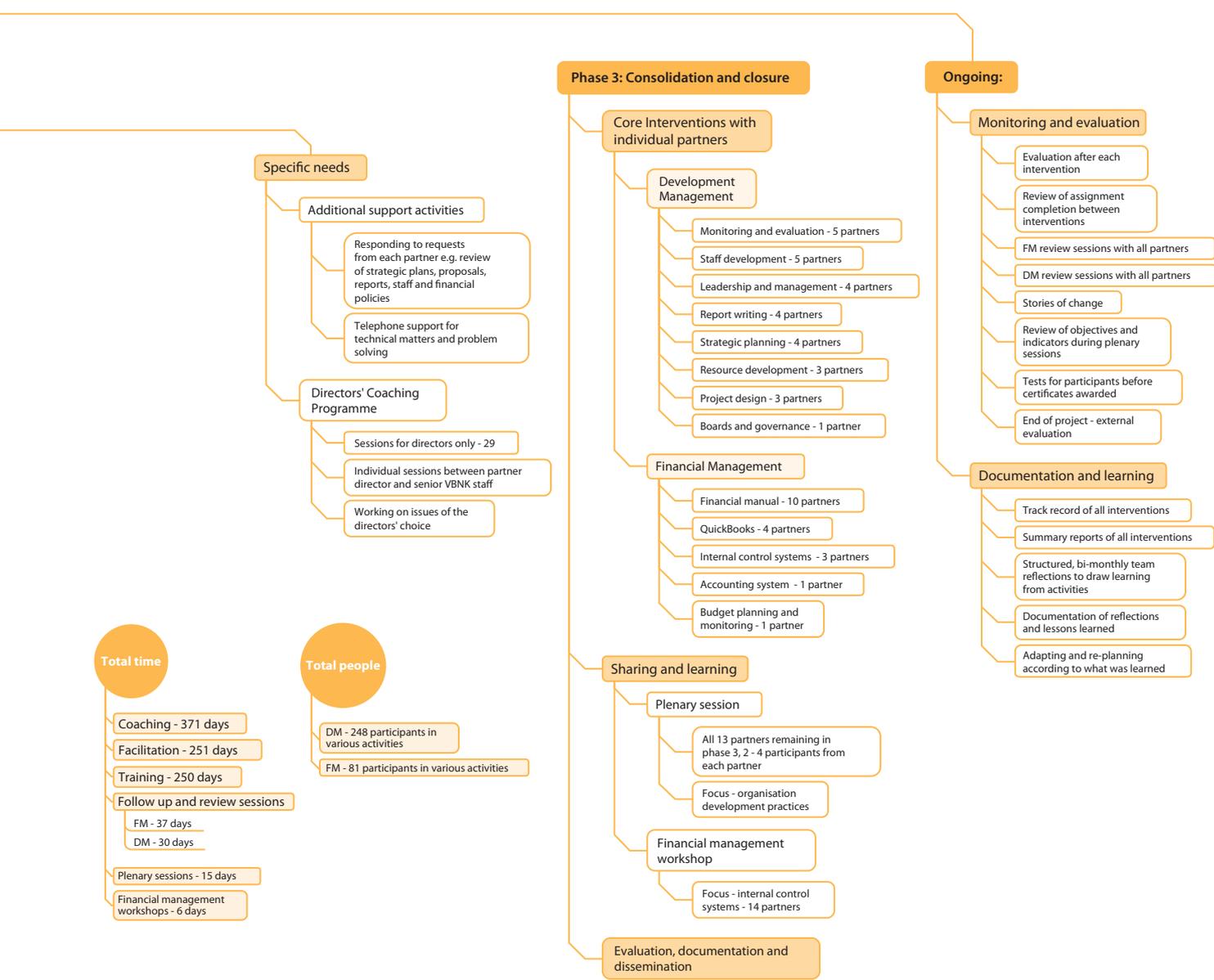


'The IPP trainer was so committed. It felt like he worked at our organisation. Even if there wasn't anyone else that I could rely on for advice, I knew I could contact him. I didn't worry about him sharing my weaknesses with the donor.'

FM participant







# STORIES OF CHANGE

Initially, our financial system was very simple but it required lots of time in filing, recording and reporting, and it consumed lots of paper. In addition, finance staff were not confident and clear about using most of the financial support documents and vouchers.

After attending training from VBNK in the IPP, I feel that we have increased knowledge and have changed and improved very much in terms of using new financial support documents, using new vouchers, using QuickBooks, and finalizing our financial manual. This provides smooth operations and cooperation between finance and programme staff, and has improved the quality of reporting by reducing preparation time to 2 or 3 days. The factors that contributed to these successes are the continuous technical support from IPP staff and the total commitment of our staff to making changes and being willing to learn and improve.

## Financial management participant

I found myself changing my performance as a result of the project implementation. Before the learning with the IPP I did not work actively, I was so fearful of anyone who was senior to me, like the managers and director. BUT, since I participated in learning with IPP-VBNK I realize that I have ability and my capacity has increased, because I can see clear direction and strategies. I have confidence with my decision-making and in participating with my colleagues.

I used my skills and experience to organize training in the communities. Resulting from my training facilitation, the capacity of villagers and committee members improved and changed.

Factors about the IPP that supported the improvements and changes in my behavior and attitude were that the facilitation motivated good cooperation among the staff, the sessions were clear, responded to needs and were easily understood, which encouraged application.

I might conclude that my improved commitment to work, confidence, communication, knowledge and skills, and the success in my work, are results of learning with VBNK. It is very important to have a series of sessions facilitated by IPP-VBNK. I decided to commit to participation in the interventions of the IPP.

## Development management participant

