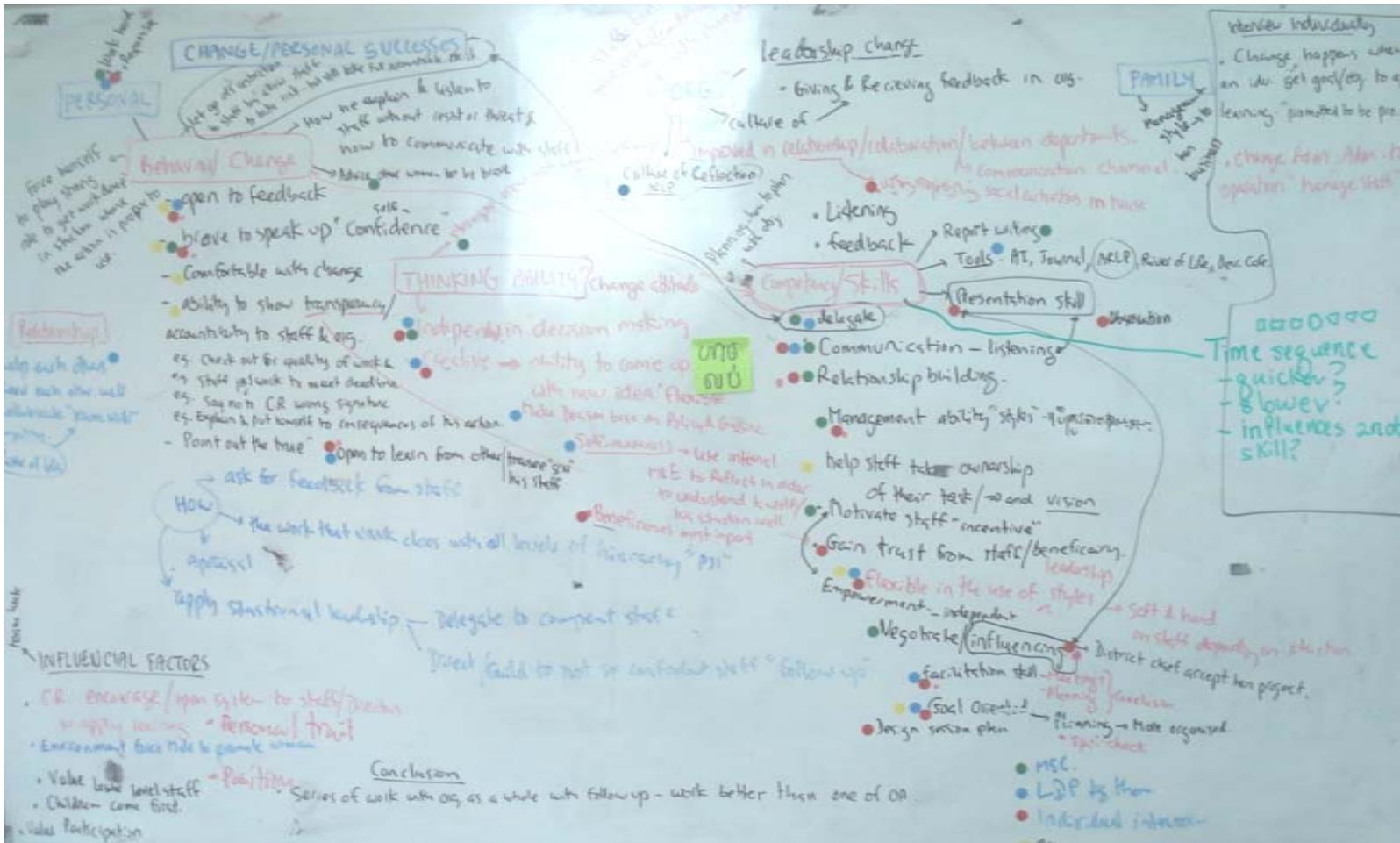


The more we learn and change,
the more we need to change to learn.

Learners Celebrating Success



Impact Assessment Report

October 2009



PREFACE

The Power of Sharing

The reason I tell this story is because I want to be sure whether I am brave enough to freely share this story with the group without feeling guilty or feeling down.

The situation happened in the last week of January and first week of February 2009. There were three members in our team; and I was asked to deliver staff capacity building training to CRS partners in Kampot for two weeks in a row. The first week of delivery did not go well, because the facilitators and the participants had quite different expectations about the course. At the end of the week I knew that my team would need to reflect and redesign before the next week's session. But I did not return to Phnom Penh after the end of the first session. This meant that I missed out on doing preparation that would have helped me to build confidence for the week two delivery. With that experience I was asked to place some points in my mid-year appraisal to improve my work performance. Those points were: to be responsible for an assigned task; to be confident to facilitate; to be proactive in asking for guidance and direction; and to pay more attention to the task.

When I was asked to include these points in my appraisal, I felt down and guilty. I blamed the situation and I blamed the other people involved. In so doing, I pushed away my responsibility and tried to defend myself from being blamed. Because of feeling guilty and low I did not really open myself to look back on that situation. It meant that I blocked out that situation and avoided talking about it so as to see what the real problem was.

Luckily, my team leader, advisor and peer coach talked regularly with me about that experience, starting with small talks. It may be because I trusted them, so it became easy for me to talk about the situation and to share the way I feel. They tried to explore more with me what really the problem was. Talking with them little by little I opened up myself to look back on that situation. And I tried to look back to my behaviour during the preparation step (when I did not have much time to meet with the team), my role and the way I worked with the team. I noted how I depended too much on others, because I felt that I was *just a trainer*, so no matter what they said, it was right.

We also spoke about the process we had designed, and how as a team we had stuck to the contract. We were not brave enough to change the process to meet the participants' needs. Although I was not very familiar with the course content, I did not take time to talk with anyone who had previously delivered a similar course. I only knew what was in the course documents and did not think ahead of what challenges I might face. Most importantly, I was not proactive enough to seek out help, or to draw on past experience (for example, to draw from the "whole person learning" approaches that I learned working in the Chart leadership programme). I depended too much on the team not on my own resources.

I can say that I am fine now to share this story to others. For sure, if the same person listened to me the first time I shared they could see the way I told before the story was quite different. In my first sharing I wore a mask in order to defend myself to be secure. But now I feel that sharing this story is a kind of lesson learnt or a reminder to share with others; to be careful about role and responsibility and working across the team; and not to repeat the same mistake.

VBNK staff member (July 2009)

SUMMARY

VBNK has been conducting annual impact assessment studies since 2006. The findings have helped us in many ways. We have been increasingly able to see patterns between what our programme participants have learned and what they have applied in their workplace. Identifying these patterns has helped us better understand what encourages the application of learning in the workplace and what helps learners get unstuck. The lessons learned from previous impact assessments have also guided us in taking stock of what is going well and in deciding about how to respond to challenges expressed by our programme participants in our programme design. We also applied these lessons to our own individual and professional learning, and to our organisational learning.

For Impact Assessment 2009 we decided to zoom in on personal successes, namely leadership, organisational effectiveness, and community voice. Experience has shown us that in some instances learning is immediate; in others learning only becomes apparent after a period of time. Thus we elected to identify groups of respondents who have participated in a VBANK programme during the period 2006 to 2008. Accordingly we made four decisions:

- To focus on former participants of VBANK's Leadership Development Programmes, including a group of women participants from a Women's Leadership Development Programme that concluded at the end of 2006.
- To follow up on participant organisations from the ICCO Partners Project (IPP) that came to a close in 2008. (The final evaluation was conducted in November 2008.)
- To follow up on participants from the VBANK Community Conversations, an annual conference where community members are brought into conversation with other civil society actors to identify and seek solutions to critical development issues.
- To identify what former participants and VBANK Programme Unit staff consider as successes in their personal learning and development, based on most significant change stories.

To achieve our objectives for IA 2009 we created three VBANK teams (with two to three staff in each team) to facilitate assessment sessions through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, appreciative inquiry, and most significant change stories. Through these sessions and the subsequent analysis, the teams came to the conclusion that there is a significant relationship between:

- Individuals realising individual potential and developing and sustaining resilient organisations;
- Individuals realising their potential and being able to influence others, so that communities have a stronger voice in local development activities and increasingly gain empowerment;
- Competent and resilient organisations contributing to positive social change through creating opportunities for communities to express their voice in matters that are important to their lives, their family and their community.

This report on Impact Assessment 2009 describes what we learned. We present in-depth analysis on (1) realising potential, (2) competent and resilient organisations, and (3) influencing change at community level. As our report Preface began with sharing a most significant change story, we end our report with sharing another.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|----------------|---|
| AI | Appreciative Enquiry |
| ARLP | Action – Reflection – Learning – Planning |
| CHART | Creative, Holistic, Action Research for Relationship Transformation |
| CWS | Church World Services |
| FGD | Focus Group Discussion |
| GROW | Goal – Realities – Obstacles/Options – Will |
| IA | Impact Assessment |
| ICCO | Dutch inter-church organisation for development cooperation |
| ILDO | Islamic Local Development Organisation |
| IPP | ICCO Partners Project |
| KAWP | Krom Akphiwat Phum |
| LDP | Leadership Development Programme |
| MODE | Minority Organisation for Development of Economy |
| MSC | Most Significant Story of Change |
| NGO | Non Governmental Organisation |
| PSI | Population Services International |
| SABORAS | Generous |
| SCN | Save the Children - Norway |
| TA | Technical Advisor |
| WLP | Women’s Leadership Programme |
| WVC | World Vision Cambodia |
| SC | Sustainable Cambodia |
| KNKS | Kumar Ney Kdey Sangkheum |
| EPDO | Environment Protection and Development Organisation |
| PPS | Phar Ponleu Selpak |
| DYMB | Dhammayietra Mongkol Borei |
| KYA | Khmer Youth Association |

1. INTRODUCTION

This is the fourth year that VBNK has conducted an annual impact assessment (IA). We know that people sometimes need to wait before having an opportunity to apply their learning, and that various factors contribute to this delay. For some, lack of confidence is a contributing factor; for others, cautiousness and fear of making a mistake and being blamed. Still others, in a hierarchical system, just wait until being called on to act.

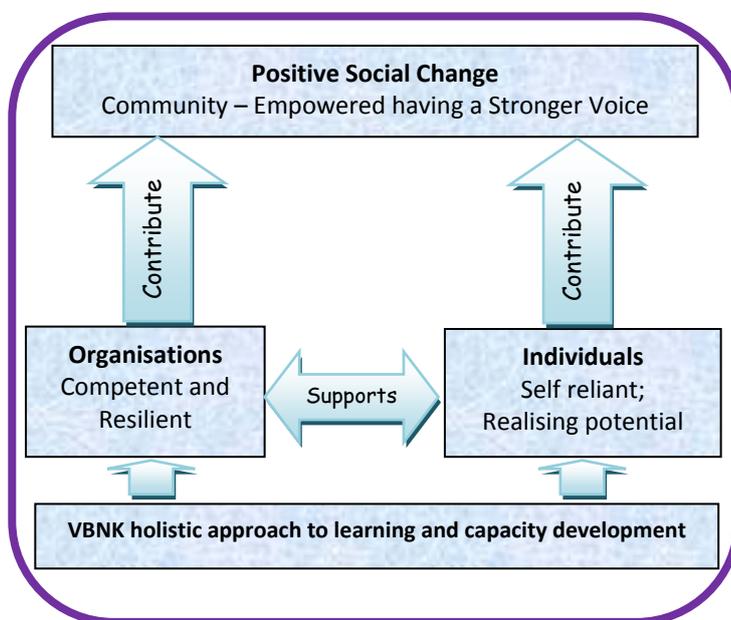
This year's IA mostly focuses in on participants from earlier years, more specifically 2006 and 2007 in order to explore how learning manifests itself over time; what factors influence people to apply their learning into their work; and what they attribute to being successful. Additionally, we included participants from the ICCO Partners Project (IPP),¹ a project that concluded in 2008. The final evaluation² found that the Project had generated many positive changes but that the complexity and long-term nature of capacity development made it difficult to fully establish the impact of IPP and recommended that VBNK follow up in 2009.

In previous years we have focused on blocks to learning and challenges faced in the application of new learning in the work place. This year we chose to draw out experiences that would celebrate successes as defined by the respondents over time. This was to test out the hypothesis that some learning (and, in particular, in leadership development programmes) takes a longer time to emerge. We also wanted to know whether or not learning was sustained overtime.

We set three themes to be the focus for our exploration:

- Organisational change and resilience;
- Leadership and change – self-realisation and its influence on family and organisation life; and
- Influencing change at community level, including changes in the nature of people's participation in development activities.

VBNK's holistic approach to capacity development is based on a set of assumptions that underpin our theory of change: when we provide quality learning services we enhance the ability of individuals to promote learning (their own and others). This in turn will lead (i) to more transparent and accountable management of development organisations; and (ii) to improved effectiveness and quality of development practice and services in the social development sector. These two outcomes are precursors to the ability of the social development sector to more effectively contribute to positive social change.



¹ The ICCO's Partners Project (IPP) core implementation and wrap up phases from 2006 to 2008) were designed to strengthen the organisational capacity and management of 18 ICCO partner organisations in order to strengthen their ability to deliver programmes that achieve positive impact.

² Partnering for Change: Final Evaluation of the ICCO Partners Project (Luisa Peticucci and Srey Phal Kien) November 2008

2. KEY RESPONDENTS AND SELECTED METHODOLOGIES

In Impact Assessment 2009, we decided not to meet a wide range of participants from all the different programmes we offer but instead to focus on four smaller homogeneous groups, specifically:

- Participants from VBNK Leadership Development programmes;
- Participants in the ICCO Partners Project (IPP);
- Participants in the 2008 Community Conversation; and
- A select group of individuals from VBNK open access training courses.

In all 41 persons (including 22 women) participated in different sessions of the IA. (See attached list of respondents in the Appendix). They included directors, managers and staff of NGOs and government departments as well as villagers who had been involved in different VBNK learning events during 2006 and 2008. The respondents came from five provinces (Banteay Meanchey, Battambang, Kampong Thom, Pursat and Siem Reap) and Phnom Penh. VBNK programme staff members were also key respondents, since we facilitated a most significant change stories session with staff as part of our Learning Week activities during July 2009.

All IA sessions were set up to promote an informal and safe environment at the respondents' place of work or at the VBNK office. Three facilitation teams (each team was made up of two to three staff) were formed to carryout the IA activities. Each team was responsible for preparing, conducting and reporting back on one theme area. Each team was also responsible for managing both the process and logistical arrangements. A VBNK Programme Manager and Technical Advisor provided support and advice to the teams as needed.

In past years we drew on focus group discussions (FGD) and in-depth interviews (IDI) as our methodology. This year we also included two other methodologies, namely Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Most Significant Change (MSC) stories.

Appreciative Inquiry

My commitment to improve the system has been enhanced because my director has demonstrated trust in me and given me full authority to make changes.

IPP Finance Manager

I have become more aware about my role, my performance and areas for improvement. I have learned to trust my staff ...and to receive feedback ...I have become convinced that the staff will be able to do a task, if we simply let them do it.

IPP Partner, Director

The AI methodology was employed with former participants of IPP. In all 8 individual AI sessions were conducted in Phnom Penh, Battambang and Kampong Thom with staff from six different organisations (ILDO, KAWP, SABORAS, NCDP, CVS, and MODE).

We felt that AI was well-suited to address two questions recommended in the IPP final evaluation: had changes identified in the final report been sustained over time? And what new learning, if any, had emerged? Thus we drew on AI to help discover the positive changes that had occurred within organisations following on from the interventions provided by the project (in terms of leadership development and organisational and programme management) and to explore whether or not these successes had been sustained since the project's closure.

The AI approach encourages a focus on what is working well and on finding ways to deliver more on what an organisation does well. The focus thus encourages respondents to celebrate successes. In this way, the methodology raises awareness amongst participants and facilitators alike of individual and organisational potential to overcome the limits that we impose, often unconsciously, on our own capacities.

Through a carefully developed set of questions and a process of dialogue, AI aims to uncover stories of "peak experiences" – *those moments in the respondents' lives when they feel most effective, most connected, most alive*. By focusing on what's right, rather than what's wrong with an organisation, AI provides access to the kind of energy that can be transformative and identifies ways to learn about how to improve programme quality and impact.

Most Significant Change Story

My work situation is increasingly smoother and better. I share [coach] my ideas and delegate more tasks. My subordinates respect me, like me and relate to me very well. As a result, my director evaluates highly my performance. This is really motivating for me. It makes me like my job even more.

Woman Manager within Council of Ministers and former WLP participant

The leadership programme helped us see the importance of giving and receiving feedback ...the organisational culture has shifted where the whole [organisation] is more open to feedback.

INGO Director and participant in a customised leadership programme

[The organisation] has changed a lot during the last 2 years. I see a big shift from tension and finger pointing ...to helping and supporting each other, treating each other with respect, and having fun.

Another Director from the same INGO

We integrated MSC into our methodology because we recognise the value of an individual telling her/his story, and of the story being heard and acknowledged by others. Over the last year, VBNK has been learning more about this methodology through application with our clients and in our internal reflection. We have discovered that MSC stories encourage an individual to reflect on her/his experience. Moreover, we have noticed that a lively interaction emerges when someone is able to tell her/his story and receives acceptance from her/his peers.

Our process guided each individual to first write her story. Telling the story allowed the story teller to clarify and elaborate parts of the story to a small group of listeners. After each participant had been given the space to tell her story, we then facilitated a group discussion about what the group considered was most significant about the stories. The in-depth conversations led to an understanding about what influenced learning and change and how learning was part of this transforming process.

Note: Typically, the MSC approach asks the group to select the story that best represents the most significant change for the whole group (community). This can be counter-cultural in the Cambodian context where inclusion and group harmony are valued and also hierarchy can work against naming one story as 'better' than another. We thus facilitated the group to first isolate elements in all stories that were 'most 'significant.' Once agreement had been reached on the critical elements, we then asked the group to select one story as being representative for the group.

For IA 2009, the MSC methodology was employed with two purposes:

- To learn about the growth and impacts made by a group of five women who had participated in a Women Leadership Programme (WLP)³ for government staff that concluded in 2006. We chose this group as the end-of-programme evaluation had indicated minimal changes within the women participants and in their ability to apply their learning into the workplace. More recently though, anecdotal evidence emerged suggesting that following the 2008 elections, a number of the women were promoted into positions of influence because of the leadership they were exercising. The women were also referring back to the leadership programme as being a critical input into increasing their confidence and skills.

VBNK trains women to become better leaders. A woman is empowered and encouraged to go on facing daily challenges. **WLP participant**

- To learn more about the growth and development of our own staff and whether or not our internal staff development efforts were paying off. We thus incorporated MSC stories in a Learning Week scheduled in July 2009, each of the 21 VBANK Programme Unit staff wrote her/his story of change. The staff subsequently identified two stories – one of these can be found on the first page of this report; the second follows our conclusions.

Focus group discussions

“The conference helped me be aware of myself. It made me feel older and responsible for my family. It helped change my thinking. ...I used to blame myself a lot [and complain] I am a poor man. I can’t do any thing, but now I have stopped that and try to find ways to improve my life. **Young man who attended the Community Conference**

In the past, the villagers who went to the conference lived isolated from the other villagers, because they are poor. They didn’t interact nor have any relations with others in the village. After they came back from the conference they seemed to dare to make conversation with others... and engage in village activities. They have now gained more respect and appreciation from the other villagers. **NGO participant**

We facilitated five FGDs where groups of 5-6 persons spoke freely and spontaneously about specific topics. Our purpose was to listen to the perceptions and ideas of the group. The group members discussed the topics together with guidance from the facilitators. The discussions gave us an opportunity to explore consensus and differences of experience about different topics and to funnel down the questions (from the open and exploratory to the more precise and present).

The respondents for three of the FGDs had participated in the *community conversation* at Banteay Meanchey province in 2008. We selected 8 women and 8 men respondents, five of them villagers and the others from either a local NGO or an international NGO. In all 8 organisations were represented from Pursat, Battambang and Banteay Meanchey provinces.

³ WLP is a module programme. Each module is one-week long and there are four-six weeks between the scheduling of each of the three modules.

The respondents in the two other FGDs had participated in the annual VBNK Leadership Development Programme⁴ (during 2006 to 2008) and the leadership development programmes customised to specific organisations.

The FGDs involved 3 directors (one woman) from an international INGO, and five managers and coordinators (including three women) from a local and international NGO.

In-depth interviews

Our parents only talk with us just when they want to give advice. (Another young woman said), I was afraid to talk with my parents: my father is often drunk and quarrels with my mother. I feel very upset and I don't like it at all but I dare not talk or express my feeling with my parents.

FGD participants

One time, one of my staff told me that I didn't smile very often, and that she found me unpleasant to work with. I was really astonished by her words. I stayed calm and thanked her for the honest feedback, although inside of me I felt really uncomfortable. I think I am more open to feedback and less impulsive.

Local NGO Programme Manager and former participant in VBNK training

In-depth one-to-one interviews (IDI) followed each FGD. Each IDI focused on more specific issues that arose during the earlier focus group discussion, including changes observed related to self, family or team, and community.

3. KEY FINDINGS

When we pool together the findings made by all three teams, we see a picture emerging about how VBNK is contributing to learning and change, individuals and organisations realising potential, and positive social development.

Learning and change

The impact assessment tells us that most significant changes take place when individuals incorporate learning into their development practice. Two sign posts help us to determine whether or not this is being done, for example, mainstreaming of new learning with peers and within the organisation; and if the learner has become a role model for others.

IA 2009 points to factors that influence the application of learning. It is essential to look at whether the individual is having an opportunity to apply her/his learning. This may be affected by support from her/ his line manager or team leader. In other cases, the application of learning has been influenced by the responsibility of the person concerned and by the workload at a particular time. On the other hand, the reality is that sometimes people have been slow or not particularly motivated to make the effort required to apply her/his learning, and this is a significant personal block to learning and change.

⁴ LDP is a module programme. Each module is one-week long and there are four-six weeks between the scheduling of each of the five modules.

We also learned about behaviours that have an affect on learning and application. For example, we often heard about the need to be brave, sometimes to simply express needs, and at other times to challenge hierarchy. Learning is influenced by one's openness to receiving feedback and new ideas. Furthermore, respondents said that tolerance and patience influence how they learn and how they apply their learning.

There is also evidence that the application of learning is influenced by how line managers and team leaders demonstrate trust, value participation and delegate work – in short, the leaders modelled learning by doing.

Realising potential

One of the specific purposes for IA 2009 was to identify what participants consider as personal successes, especially in the contexts of organisational change and resilience, and leadership and change.

What we found was that each individual respondent displayed both technical and inter-personal competencies that encouraged motivation and positive risk taking – the willingness to try out new tools, approaches and to talk about new learning concepts.

The findings confirmed that if staff of organisations are to feel empowered, have ownership for their work and engage in decision making, then there must be change in leadership style within their organisations. Such leadership shifts must demonstrate willingness to delegate, and commitment to implement new initiatives. Generally, respondents attributed these shifts to the participatory approaches used by VBNK that brought staff and leader together to engage in discussion and simply *to dialogue together*.

Many of the leaders and managers we spoke with reported consciously changing how they communicate with and support and coach staff, for instance, by listening till the end of conversation and listening for meaning rather than for wording. They report they are also giving more attention to staff's feelings — and expressing more empathy.

People's participation in social development activities

“VBNK wants to see positive social change, where all people are empowered to learn and grow with dignity, respect and confidence, and where the social development sector is contributing to the development process in a creative and effective manner”.

The IA has informed us about improved relationships and interactions, better harmonisation within small teams and community groups (e.g. self help groups), and confidence to more actively participate in community development activities and other events.

The key is focusing on relationships and interactions that in turn influence changes in individual interactions, i.e. from dominating others to accepting other's ideas, to valuing other's contributions and drawing more on consultative approaches and consensus building in decision making. This is a significant finding in a context where hierarchy and status are predominant. The most important contribution came from shifts in individual behaviour – a move towards self awareness and confidence, towards self reflection and not blaming and towards a value of learning and sharing together.

However, we are aware that dialogue between young and old persons remains constrained and that this impacts on the nature of participation in development activities. For example, when communication is mostly telling others what to do, there is a lost opportunity to draw upon and bring together the older and younger experiences and aspirations.

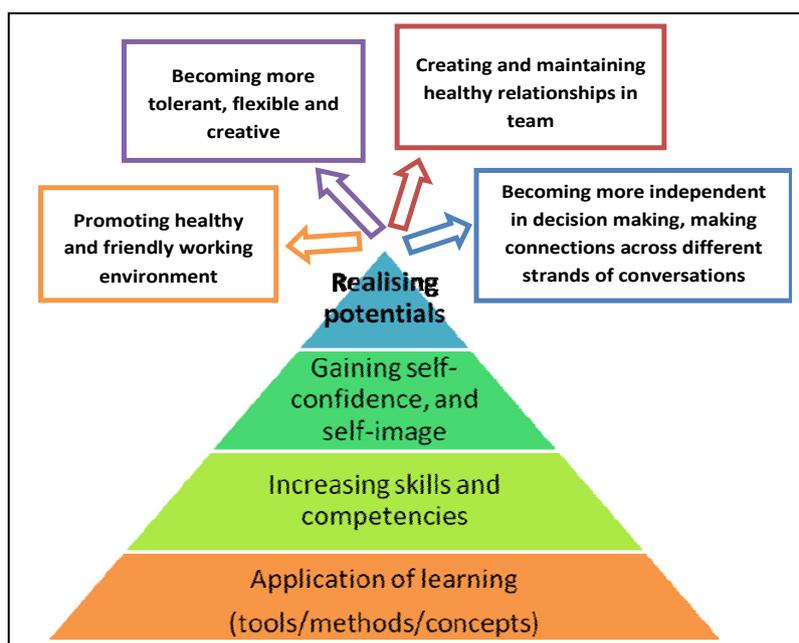
4. IN-DEPTH ASSESSMENTS

4.1. Realising Potential — having influence on self, family and organisation⁵

[The report in this section is based on a MSC session and two FGD sessions with 17 respondents, 12 female, who participated in either the Women Leadership Programme (WLP) in 2006 or the Leadership Development Programme (LDP) in 2008.]

What explicitly came clear to us is exercising new leadership knowledge/skills and tools learned from various places, including VBNK, whether in persons or in organisations, bring about changes to personal and professional growth as well as to organisations. How does this happen?

Our analysis helped us better understand paths of change that people go through. We are more convinced that change starts from application of learning, leading to an increase of skills and competencies. Being recognised by others as a competent person, armed with self-selected and diverse skills/knowledge, results in increasing self-confidence and self-image, which eventually, sheds light on realising potentials. Realised potential makes a learner well-equipped and ready to be an agent of change.



What change stories did we hear?

The stories varied, not just the topics but the factors that influenced success.

An increasing of self-confidence and self-image as a male or female leader, and becoming more tolerant to complexity and flexible influence change in respondents' working environment and personal growth and professional success:

- Five women involved in the (WLP) were promoted to be deputy and head of various government departments.
- Respondents from both CWS and PSI described a shift from scary, competitive, blaming working environment to a friendly working environment where staff feel safe to provide and receive constructive feedback. They experienced also increasing productivity.
- PSI respondents mentioned their staff readiness and being less fearful to emerging changes in the organisation.

We found what contributed to these successes; each individual respondent displayed competencies both in technical and inter-personal skills gained through having motivation and taking risk to apply

⁵ Mr. Seoung Sothear Rwat, Training Team Leader; Mr. Tem Sokchea, Trainer/Facilitator; Mr. Chi Sothy, Training Team Leader

tools, methods and learning concepts from VBNK activities and other experiences. The selected tools and methods were used continuously from the time they completed their participation at VBNK until they became more skilful.

As the result of continuously practicing the skills and applying the tools, respondents reported gaining confidence in facilitating meetings, planning processes, providing one on one coaching and support, delegating tasks and building staff capacity. At the same time they shifted more appropriately between different leadership styles according to time, situation and staff capacity.

One time, one of my staff told me that I often do not smile and that she found me unpleasant to work with. I was really astonished by her words. I stayed calm and thanked her for her honest feedback, although inside of me I felt uncomfortable. I think I am more open to feedback and less impulsive. **LDP participant**

What kind of growth did we see as a result of being a competent leader and a skilled staff person?

In connection to the application of learning, we heard the story of change in their current leadership practice. Many of the leaders and managers we interviewed reported they changed the way they communicate with, support and coach staff by listening to the end of the conversation – not interrupting and giving opinion – and listening more for meaning rather than for wording. They paid more attention to staff feelings— showing empathy to staff, and they created a culture of giving and receiving feedback.

Some of the leaders described how they let go of their top down management styles and shifted to working with staff to set objectives for improvement and work performance. They promoted learning and self-awareness in their organisation and encouraged journaling and reflection (ARLP), and provided time and space for staff to be creative in their planning, decision making and designing work plans.

Leaders in two of the three organisations used river of life⁶ during their staff retreat to help build connection and empathy among team members as well as building team spirit. This methodology and process, learned during the VBNK leadership programme, led to a refreshed vision, identity and values of their organisation.

They were independent in their thinking ability— making connections across different strands of conversation and more holistic in designing a workshop or a project that was more responsive to participants' and beneficiaries' needs.

More than half of the respondents took more responsibility and accountability for their actions, their staff and their organisation as a whole. They were more able to calm down, show tolerance, flexibility and creativity in their work and role as leader and manager. Four out of five WLP respondents talked about becoming braver to speak up, daring to express their needs and say no, with reason, to their hierarchy. They saw themselves as a leader as they helped other women to be brave.

However, not everyone we interviewed reported had tried, either a few times or frequently, applying some of the new tools/concepts.⁷ Three respondents out of the 13 who didn't apply much of their learning reported that they did not have time. The causes for having no time were related to the individual capacity to saying no, success influencing (inject own idea) to hierarchy and confidence to delegate some tasks to others. Other factors were having difficulties applying any new tools at first, and therefore giving up, and not believing in the methods.

⁶ *River of Life* is a tool for building connection, communication and relationship. It is mostly used in a training, workshop or staff retreat.

⁷ For example, there was greater likelihood of practicing situational leadership, ARLP, coaching - using three levels of listening skills, the GROW model, and non-violent communication.

In contrast, the many others who applied their new learning told us about factors that motivated them to apply their learning were being given time and space. Their top leaders encouraged, supported and sometimes pushed them to put learning into practice. Other motivating factors were fear of losing job, competition for recognition and rewards, trend of change in culture of the organisation (everyone changed, so I need to change), and personality trait of the individual.

What we learned

We confirmed that long-term working— up to nine months or one year— with the top management level (the leader and manager) proved to help the leaders direct and adapt learning into various situations because it allowed time for participants to try out and apply learnings into their work and family contexts, especially due to coaching sessions between modules. In this instance, a modular programme gave us more time to deal with people's lack of confidence. In addition, to meet peers again after the module interval provided the opportunity to talk about what one tried, what happened and how the person felt about influencing a change.

I often ask for feedback from my staff. I provide full power and decision making to staff, and I observe what they do. Often I see that they can do very well, and they come to ask me for clarification, when they need. **LDP participant**

4.2. Competent and Resilient Organisations⁸

The descriptions in this section are drawn from 8 individual interviews using an appreciative inquiry approach conducted in Phnom Penh, Battambang and Kampong Thom.



This analysis led to deepening our understanding about elements that make up the theory of change articulated for IPP. The interview protocol we used explored current practices and changes that took place after the conclusion of IPP. Our analysis has led us to recognise three emerging themes, which are discussed in this report. These are empowerment and ownership, resilience and change, and the link between learning and sustained change.

Empowerment to take ownership and risks is a significant factor in building confidence and enhancing commitment to robust organisational practice and programme quality.

The common theme of the findings centres on the importance of empowerment within an organisation that allows staff to take ownership and take risks in performing their assigned work. Such empowerment requires a shift in leadership style and willingness to delegate. This in turn allows staff to learn and grow through doing and builds commitment to taking on and implementing new initiatives.

My commitment to improve the system has been enhanced because my director has demonstrated trust in me and given me full authority to make changes.
IPP Participant, Finance Manager

Throughout all interviews, examples of changes in leadership style toward empowering staff were very prominent. The most important critical success factors, identified by both leaders and subordinates, in enhancing commitment to learning and to attain the

I have become more aware about my role, my performance and areas for improvement. I learn to trust my staff's ability and to receive feedback from my staff. I am better aware of the needs of my staff and know how to help them grow. I became convinced that the staff will be able to do a task, if we simply let them do it ... We learnt it from IPP.
IPP Partner, Director

⁸ Mr. Phum Thol, Programme Co-Manager and Mr. Sim Chankiroth, Trainer/Facilitator

organisation's mission are increasing awareness and understanding of:

- a. The leader's role in working effectively with staff;
- b. The importance of engaging staff in decision making and supporting them to learn from successes and mistakes;
- c. The significance in delegating tasks.

Respondents reported that this awareness and understanding came about as the participatory approaches used by VBNK brought all staff and their leaders together to engage in simple dialogue. Such involvement in decision making, co-creation of learning activities, and mutual dialogue allowed both leaders and staff to value the importance of working together to achieve common objectives.

Building resilient and sustained organisation capacity requires a systems approach toward managing financial resources and delivering programme quality/impacts.

Most interviewees expressed that the VBNK approach in helping them to understand and work with a complex set of interdependent factors of their organisation management and collaboratively learning in partnership to build ownership of learning and changes are essential to achieve resilient and sustained organisation capacity. The approach has allowed them to visualise the complete picture of how each system in their organisation functions and is interrelated.

In 2009, one of our donors visited and asked us to develop a three-year project proposal with a \$273,500 annual budget. Previously our project budget had only been \$7,000 per year. This prospect of success was due to their increased confidence in our programme and financial management.

IPP Partner, Executive Director

We previously focused too much on revealing to outsiders about our transparency and accountability and forgot the importance of showing transparency and promoting understanding in financial management internally. VBNK helped us to see such importance and we changed.

IPP Partner, Finance Manager

With such abilities respondents have claimed to have an increase in confidence in managing and revising their management systems to accommodate new changes, particularly in the time of core funding withdrawal and shifting toward other sectors of operation, for example moving towards social enterprise. In addition, they gave examples of helping other departments rather than just focusing on their work. All the interviewees were able to give a successful change story about the strengthened organisational capacity and how they could revise and improve the practices/systems after the VBNK intervention.

- *Our project design process has been changed. Before the project proposal was developed by only one or two senior managers. After IPP, the organisation involved all senior staff, board members and beneficiaries, and religious leaders in the community to design the project. And now we can write a better project proposal.*

IPP Partner, Executive Director

- *With technical and facilitation knowledge gained from VBNK, we have designed a financial management training course and coaching for 37 Community Based Organisations in 7 districts, which is one of the major components of our new three year strategic plan.*

IPP Partner, Financial Coordinator

On the other hand, significant insights can be drawn from the previous examples, namely capacities are sustained even after a VBNK intervention. Staff have been able to apply their learning into different needs and situations. The most common examples were about adopting participatory approaches and building ownership of learning into a successful project design process.

To allow learning to take root and to promote sustainable growth in the organisation requires a diverse range of processes not simply delivery of training content.

Creating ownership for change was cited by respondents as key to helping them learn and apply their learning. This applied across all aspects of the organisation (e.g. finance, human resources, governance or strategic planning). Further ensuring that learning was contextualised in the work – not just theory

We believe in VBNK approaches to capacity building and are strongly convinced that the methods that VBNK used in IPP has brought about ownership of learning and commitment to apply them.

IPP Partner, Chair of Coordinating Committee

– allowed them to understand the principles underlying the content and also to know how to effectively use these principles in different situations.

In addition, ARLP (action-reflection-learning-planning) was mentioned in all interviews as an important tool that respondents continue to use to reflect on their past actions for future improvement. Their reflections have brought about programme innovation and improvements. There was also evidence among the participating organisations of the increased awareness and value given to ongoing learning. Examples were given about committing time to regular reflection meetings; providing space and opportunities for application of learning; and most importantly, leaders empowering staff to take positive risks in their work. In addition, all respondents reported that knowledge and skills gained from VBNK had been important and the foundation to move upward in building a sustainable capacity.

What we learned

The findings further support VBNK's lessons learnt drawn from ICCO Partners Project, namely - commitment of both the whole organisation and individuals, especially the leadership is necessary for an organisation's successful change and learning to happen. Most importantly, the findings confirmed that our approach in building on people's strength and working in collaboration with them so that they come up with their own learning and solutions to challenges and issues is effective in rooting new learning and helping the existing knowledge to grow. One important lesson drawn from this study is that it takes time and space for learning to take root, and leadership's support is very critical in making this successful.

4.3. Influencing Change at Community Level: Changes in the nature of people's participation in development activities⁹

[The findings in this section are drawn from three FGDs where 8 women and 8 men spoke about their experiences following their participation in the community conversation held at Banteay Meanchey in 2008.]

VBNK has been holding an annual community conversation conference since 2007. Each conference brings together a diverse group of people to discuss development issues in Cambodia, with an emphasis on trans-generational dialogue and therefore includes young and older people, as well as those working inside and outside of the development sector.

The VBANK community conversation draws on a participatory approach of co-learning among facilitators and communities. This process of discovery and co-learning allows development practitioners and community members to be released from their fears, unpack their own problems and to work in liberating ways with others. Through using an interactive, participatory approach to understanding issues and generating new thinking and potential solutions, community conversations encourage confidence in participants' own knowledge. In this way the community sets its own targets for what is to be achieved, and in so doing provides a more enduring plan for social change.¹⁰

VBANK Impact assessment 2009 aimed to explore whether or not participating in the conference has influenced the conference participants' interaction within communities and if this was bringing about changes in the nature of community participation in development activities.

We found that the community conversation conference did lead to a positive impact on individual participant's behaviour, and allowed them to receive recognition. We believe that as a result an individual can then influence her/his family, community, work team and organisation.

Throughout the FGDs in three provinces we found out, in general, that participants mostly kept what they learned from the conferences with themselves. They pinpointed the opportunity to do cross cutting conversation between different aged groups being useful to gain some new knowledge and understanding, e.g. history of the country, and create more mutual understanding among the three aged-groups of people. However, they perceived the conference as a training event rather than a forum for discussion. Consequently, they were not well able to give practical examples or evidence about changes at the community level.

What we found as change on individual behaviour

All respondents had noted her/his own changes over the year. They described that the key messages they had learned from the conference were self awareness and confidence, self reflection and not to blame. They reported that they had been practicing this learning at their work and home.

All the respondents who are staff of NGOs reported that they are becoming more patient and are paying more attention to listen both to their staff and to the villagers they serve. Staff members also described how they are 'brave' to express their ideas and confidently provide feedback to their supervisors.

⁹ Mr. Vanly Virya, Programme Co-Manager and Mr. Srey Vanthorn, Senior Trainer/Facilitator

¹⁰ Conference reports with a more detailed explanation of the approach can be found at www.vbnk.org

A NGO worker from Pursat said, *"I am now tolerant to the feedback from my staff and my supervisor. Before I often blamed my subordinates when they didn't get a task done on time or when they made mistakes. But now I am able to make a conversation about the mistakes and help staff reflect on their work and find ways to do jobs better."*

A young female (currently studying in high school grade 11) said, *"I am now more confident in expressing ideas and talking in public."* She added, *"I've even have feedback from my friends about my changed behaviour. Most of my friends told me that over the year I became a good team player and made good interaction with all friends."* During the FGD the VBNK facilitators observed that she was excited and active in the discussion. She looked spontaneous and listened and interacted well with the other respondents (who were made up of NGOs staff).

Some respondents confirmed that they had changed from trying to influence (i.e. dominate) others to accept their ideas to giving more value to others and to using a consultative approach of working towards consensus decision making. Some mentioned about changing the way they communicate with the villagers, e.g. trying not to behave as an expert, telling people what to do, but rather listening to the villagers' issues and helping them think through solutions. Still others talked about becoming more empathetic and seeing more of good things in others.

Some of the respondents who were middle and older mentioned that through their involvement in the conference they felt encouraged to learn. They used to feel hopeless, that learning is not important for the old. But now they seemed to have more motivation from inside to learn and to get involved in learning events, inside or outside their communities. By valuing the learning they now motivate their children to go to school and encourage their children to be involved in social and other development activities.

One respondent, in Battambang, has been practicing to divert his anger by trying to see positive things in others. By doing so, he feels peaceful and healthy, especially in his mind. Another person noted that after the conference he became very calm and felt mature in managing his business and family.

Most respondents reported that the work done in the conference on vision development and strategic thinking had been most useful and they had applied these techniques into their work. Most are now concentrating on longer-term planning rather than short-term or day-to-day activities in both their work and life.

A young man in Battambang said, *"The conference helped me be aware about myself. It made me feel older and responsible for my family. It helped change my thinking. For example, I used to blame myself a lot ...I am a poor man I can't do any thing, but now I've stopped [complaining] and try to find ways to improve my living."*

What we found about receiving recognition

Two female respondents, in Battambang and Banteay Meanchey, who serve as members of the village development committee reported that they feel proud that they now receive more recognition and appreciation from other villagers, especially from the members of the self help group.

NGOs respondents in Pursat noted how the villagers who participated in the conference changed the way they interacted with other villagers and also their interactions with the NGOs:

In the past, the villagers who went to the conference lived isolated from the other villagers because they are poor. They didn't interact nor have any relations with others in the village. After they came back from the conference they seemed to dare to make conversation with others. They said hello and chatted with other villagers, and engaged

in village activities. They have now gained more respect and appreciation from the other villagers.

What we found influenced individuals and her/his family, community, work team and organisation.

Individual participants provided reports of how they had influenced others. For example, there were reports of improved relationships and interactions; better collaboration within small teams and group meetings (i.e. self help groups); and more active participation from community members in community development activities and other events.

All the NGO respondents reported that they found the relationship between themselves and their colleagues had improved after the conference and that this has positively impacted the working environment in their organisations; there is more interaction and better understanding. Team work has also improved with staff helping each other and sharing responsibilities and going beyond simply doing the job assigned. An NGO practitioner from Pursat reported:

My team worked, at the office, like a family. We treated each other like brothers and sisters. My team members now have a habit of conducting a daily reflection. We are not rushing to get home after coming back from the villages. Instead, we always have a short meeting to reflect about the day.

The respondents in Battambang talked about greater cooperation in the villages where they work; community members are participating more in village meetings and community development work, and there are fewer complaints about the village or commune chief. For example, a respondent who is villager said that through her interaction she encouraged other villagers to calm down and behave appropriately with each other. She had observed that the villagers now stop shouting and pointing problems to the village/commune chief but instead try to advocate in softer persuasive way. She said, *“Now if we want CC do something for us, like making a road, we collectively write a letter with thumb prints and send to CC.”*

What we see as repetitive gap in dialogue between young and old persons

In the conference we facilitated a dialogue between the older generation and youth, because we wanted to demonstrate the importance of listening and learning across generations. In the FGDs we observed that not everyone had changed their way of ‘talking at’ others. There continues to be a gap in dialogue between younger and older persons. This is particularly noticeable amongst the NGO group – both old and young NGO staff – continue to believe that they hold expert knowledge; thus, they must tell others what to do. Such one-way communication prevents people from expressing their own views and creating and owning their own development. Hierarchy, status and a sense of entitlement remain deep-rooted within the Cambodian mindset. This confirms a finding from the conference report¹¹, namely that:

...while there are more opportunities to participate in various development forums, many communities do not feel empowered to take ownership of development processes – development remains something that is done to them.

However, there were also reports of NGO staff resisting the urge to fall back on these entrenched patterns and struggle to overcome the barriers they encounter in their work.

¹¹ A Decade of Change: Community Conference Report, VBNK (July 2009): <http://www.vbnk.org/Articles/A%20Community%20Conversation2009%20conference-english.pdf>

One NGO practitioner in Banteay Meanchey reported:

I am facing difficulty to maintain equal relationships and interactions with the older people. I don't think the older people in my community value or listen to the young people. I don't know how I can influence the older generation who remain conservative in their thinking and just want to tell the young what to do.

We also noticed that one young female respondent was very quiet and did not interact in the FGD. When we tried to engage her in the discussion, she appeared just to smile and laugh but said that she has nothing to share. We followed up by asking her and the group about factors that prevent participation. We found that stereotypical norms in relation to parent and family strongly influence young people. For instance, two young females respondent reported that their parents are very busy to earn their living, and that they have little interaction with their parents. *"Our parents only talk with us just when they want to give advice."* Another young woman reported that she was afraid to talk with her parents: *"My father is often drunk and quarrels with my mother. I feel very upset and I don't like it at all but I dare not talk or express my feeling with my parents."*

Parents who experienced poverty throughout their lives are necessarily encouraging their children to concentrate on earning an income for the family. This priority prevents many children from becoming involved in community development activities. Through the FGD we noted the young in Battambang are not very much interested in observing the changes at the community level, because they are preoccupied with finding a way to earn an income and the possibility of unemployment.

What we learned

We can confirm that the community conversation conference has made a positive impact on individual participants including changing their behaviour and the way they think. Participants are now speaking up more and are thus gaining recognition from their peers and communities. Most of the respondents described changes in the way they interact with communities and how they are providing a role model for others. This in turn allows them to bring forward new ideas and to influence community members.

However, we found little change and impact in terms of the community development practice. That is, we found few examples of application of dialogue processes, which had been introduced in the conference process, into community meetings or events. The habit of not sharing information widely¹² and the limited capacity of the participants to see linkages between the conference approach and actual work environments, contribute to this limitation.

We received an interesting suggestion: many respondents proposed that there be a province-based focus issues conference. We would expect that the NGO participants make a commitment to echo the event at districts or rural communities. They would like that VBNK support and follow up these events.

¹² Cambodian society, torn apart by war and trauma, has yet to reconnect to itself and the gaps in sharing information are in many ways greater than in most societies. Yet there is much that people could learn from each other that would not only enrich their lives but also contribute greatly to Cambodia's future development.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the VBNK identity statement, we describe ourselves as *a dynamic Cambodian learning organisation at the forefront of capacity development*. We see that capacity development is about how people develop themselves. We understand that capacity development is the overall ability of a system to perform and sustain itself (to become resilient).

Our holistic approach to organisational capacity development is based on our understanding that learning is the key to achieving lasting organisational change. For IA 2009, we chose to explore and learn about how our work has strengthened and sustained the capacity of participating organisations to achieve their mission, in short to effect positive social change.

We observed that modular programmes, as offered in VBNK's leadership programmes, and long-term sequential programmes like IPP working towards sustainable organisational development, have a greater impact because participants have opportunities to practice, gain experience and reflect on what they are doing. Regularly scheduled coaching sessions offer systematic support to learning and to dealing with the application of learning. They also offer participants with the advantage to talk with their peers and to follow up on their learning in subsequent training sessions. Reflective learning sessions provide opportunities to hear about what someone has tried on, about their successes and failures. In this way, participants can draw solidarity and gain comfort from each other – they discover about self.

For VBNK, facilitating Programme staff to write and discover our own most significant change stories has allowed us clarify personal experiences that lead to learning and change. This internal reflection has been vital for us to (re-)discover what we value most and how we can best influence organisational change and positive social development in our work with our clients.

Are we satisfied with what we learned from IA 2009?

- We appreciated the openness of respondents during the impact assessment sessions. We plan to continue with these methodologies and to seek out more and more personal accounts on learning, change and success.
- Our emphasis on success stories led to seeing what is working well; we are well aware that we did not surface issues about what is “broken” and what needs to be fixed. However, we believe that an individual's and organisation's learning path has to also celebrate successes and thereby channel that enthusiasm. We need to devote more attention to recognise the results of building on successful experiences, and acknowledging what is working.
- IA 2009 deepened our understanding about connectedness. We see more clearly what influences individuals realising potential, especially being a leader of self and others. The analysis re-confirms the interdependence between competence, behaviour and attitude.
- Finally, we have gained deeper insight into what encourages people to apply their learning. The examples given by the respondents provide us with direction on what issues to integrate into our future programmes, so that learners increasingly apply their learning into their workplace, and contribute to a common vision for positive social development.

IA 2009 has created opportunities to have meaningful conversations about learning and change. We are confident that the lessons learned for us this year will be well integrated into our own practice and Annual Work Plan for 2010. We would like to also see that methodologies like appreciative inquiry and most significant change stories are used more often by others to promote sharing of experience and generating recognition.

A final story of change

"Imagination is more important than knowledge", Albert Einstein

When one talks about education or learning, one is talking about gaining wisdom about everything one does, about the situations one is in and about living one's life. Wisdom is one's ability to imagine possibilities and to solve one's own problems, whereas knowledge is something to do with the information available to oneself. And one can get stuck because one can't see further than the limits of the knowledge that one has. The significant change I am describing here is something to do with my developing the ability to see possibilities through imagination. This ability to imagine opens up doors to solutions for various conditions and situations I am in both personally and professionally.

For the past year and a half I have struggled to survive and to fight against my fear and low self-confidence. Working in the Chart leadership programme team, and in particular, working alongside the Technical Advisor (TA), at first, put me into an even more frightening situation. I was not used to doing things loosely. Co-facilitating with the TA was an unpleasant experience for me. I could not cope with uncertainty, unclear task division, changing direction and adapting in the moment. I felt I was being dragged and pulled by the TA in different directions.

Fortunately, in the past six months I was also involved in designing and co-facilitating other VBANK services, which allowed me to apply what I had learned to new situations. In particular, I was able to apply whole person learning (WPL) and development concepts I had been working with in the Chart leadership programme to new situations. This prompted me to think outside the box and to draw on my own ability to think creatively and imagine anew.

The VBANK programmes I have been involved included:

- A one-week Leadership Development Programme for PSI directors (with an external consultant)
- Strategic Planning and Staff Retreat for Theing Tnot Organisation (with the VBANK Programme Manager)
- A one-week course, Learning to Learn, for all staff from one NGO
- A staff retreat for staff of an international NGO (with other VBANK colleagues)
- A leadership programme for youth participants of Child-Fund Cambodia
- An orientation seminar on Chart Programme and Development Concept for staff of Church World Services

Engaging in these different programmes has shown me several things: first, that I can succeed and, that while the previous year and a half has been confusing, I have been learning along the way. Second, my ability to design new programmes or to step into new contexts relies upon my ability to open my imagination to possibilities. Third, the attention I have paid in the past year to increasing self-awareness and self-confidence (my self concept) has contributed to this ability. Being sure about who I am has helped me not to judge myself and to not get stuck on negative-self talk. Fourth, freeing myself from self-judging and not restricting myself to a standard of perfection, I can now be satisfied with the way I am – I am ok as I am. As the result, I am now open to accessing large amounts of information outside my existing knowledge. The key to this wisdom, for me anyway, has been building self-esteem through learning about myself. Self-knowledge expands my ability to cope and deal with challenges and is the key to positive thinking — God of creation not God of destruction.

I am also accepting that, despite this ability to generate new ideas for different situations, I am restricted to certain skills. I need to expand my facilitation, listening and ability to ask questions that help others think deeply about their work and life. And I need to develop skill in using action methods like forum theatre, drama. These are areas I need to practice more in order to grow further.

VBANK staff member (July 2009)

APPENDIX: IMPACT ASSESSMENT - LIST OF RESPONDENTS

| No. | Name | Sex | Title | Organisation |
|-----|------------------|-----|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | Sim Sakhorn | M | Executive Director | SABOROS |
| 2 | Vun Vet | M | Financial Manager | SABOROS |
| 3 | Nhai Reth | M | Liaison Coordinator | KAWP |
| 4 | Norm Saroout | M | Accountant | KAWP |
| 5 | Sem Kalyan | F | Executive Director | ILDO |
| 6 | El Stremom | F | Admin Officer | ILDO |
| 7 | Sin Soeub | M | Program Coordinator | MODE |
| 8 | Van Kort | M | Finance Manager | MODE |
| 9 | Prum Kalyane | F | | Council of Ministers |
| 10 | Lay Onry | F | | M. of Interior |
| 11 | So Naren | F | Deputy Director General | M. of National Assembly |
| 12 | Im Sovannary | F | | State Secretariat of Public Service |
| 13 | Chea Phalin | F | Deputy Director General | M. of Information |
| 14 | Tang Sotheara | M | Director of PLAIT | PSI |
| 15 | Long Dyanna | F | Strategic Information Director | PSI |
| 16 | Chuon Setha | M | Director of Finance | PSI |
| 17 | Keo Sarath | M | Programme Manager | SCN |
| 18 | Lek Thong | M | Finance Manager | SCN |
| 19 | Khat Ty Ekvisoth | F | Programme Manager | SCN |
| 20 | Khem Sophal | F | Project coordinator | CWS |
| 21 | DY Sovann | F | Project coordinator | CWS |
| 22 | Tim Soeup | F | Director | KT |
| 23 | Ros Sydin | F | Team Leader | PDCP |
| 24 | Koy Phally | F | Government officer | Ecosorn/Government |
| 25 | Siv Samnang | M | | Friends International |
| 26 | Orn Sophalla | M | Educator Coordinator | SC |
| 27 | Bou Sreyroth | F | Student | SC |
| 28 | Din Ketya | M | Staff | KNKS |

| No. | Name | Sex | Title | Organisation |
|-----|-------------------|-----|------------------------|--------------|
| 29 | Khen Chantha | F | Village Peer Educator | KNKS |
| 30 | Sun Phalla | M | Programme Manager | EPDO |
| 31 | Som Mony | M | Staff | PPS |
| 32 | Pov Thinetra | F | Artist | PPS |
| 33 | San Marady | F | Artist | PPS |
| 34 | Paov Sorbin | M | Senior Trainer | AMARA |
| 35 | Chhoeum Sokha | F | Commune Committee | AMARA |
| 36 | In Deluxe | M | Staff | DYMB |
| 37 | Phann Sar | M | Chief of Older Commune | DYMB |
| 38 | Chheng Saloun | F | Villager | OCKENDEN |
| 39 | Norng Bunsorn | M | Programme Officer | OCKENDEN |
| 40 | Chhum Siv Eng | F | Programme Staff | KYA |
| 41 | Keo Pich Kondeang | F | Trainer | KYA |