

VBNK 10th ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE
‘A DIALOGUE BETWEEN GENERATIONS’
REPORT

1 Introduction

In most societies various means—such as story telling, rites of passage, the performing arts and formal education—are the channels for history, culture and tradition to be kept alive and transmitted from one generation to another. Sadly for Cambodians, recent history and rapid technological change have combined to create a major blockage in the normal flow of tradition, culture and wisdom from one generation to another, while cultural challenges such as the resistance of the old to learning from the young remain strong. Cambodian society, torn apart by war and trauma, has yet to reconnect to itself, and the gaps in sharing and understanding between young and old are in many ways greater than in most societies. Yet there is much that each generation could learn from others that would not only enrich their lives but also contribute greatly to Cambodia’s future development.

In order to contribute to overcoming these gaps in communication and understanding, VBNK hosted a dialogue between the generations as part of its 10th anniversary activities.

2 Participants



A total of 81 Cambodians, including 39 women, from all age groups and walks of life, attended the conference. The ages of the participants ranged from 17 to 71 years. They all used the opportunity to work together and explore what they could learn from each other and how they could work together to build a strong future.

The participants were divided into three different age groups. Twenty-eight people,¹ including 13 women, were clustered in group A (the youngest group, whose ages ranged between 15 and 29), 24 people,² including 17 women, were in group B (aged between 30 and 53 years) and 29 people³ were in group C (the old group whose age over 53 year old). The list of participants is attached in Appendix 1.

1. The participants were: eight from Youth for Peace, six from Khmer Youth Association, four each from Youth Star Cambodia and Girl Guides of Cambodia, and one each from Youth Volunteers for Youth Development, Khmer Youth Spirit Club, Youth and Child Hope Development, Phnom Srey Association for Development, Youth Education Social, and Community Development Education. A majority of participants came from Phnom Penh and the rest from Kompong Cham, Kratie, Prey Veng and Battambang provinces.

2. Four from Church World Service, two from Cambodian Family Economic Development Association, six each from Partnership for Development in Kampuchea, Banteay Srei, and Krom Akphiwat Phum. They all came from provincial locations: Svay Rieng, Kompong Thom, Banteay Meanchey, Prey Veng, Kompong Speu, Siem Reap and Battambang.

3. Three each from Phnom Srey Association for Development and Kasekor Thmey, five from Alliance for Conflict Transformation, and six each from Help Age, Dhhama Yietra, and Famer Organic Development Association. They all came from provinces: Kompong Cham, Kampt, Battambang, Banteay Meanchey and Siem Reap.

3 Conference Processes

3.1 Objectives

The conference had two main objectives:

- to bring together different generations of Cambodians and give them the opportunity to discuss, share and learn together about Cambodia's development;
- to identify what each can contribute to Cambodia's future development.

3.2 Theme

A dialogue between generations:

- what each generation can learn from the other;
- what each generation can contribute to Cambodian's development.



3.3 Process

The process was designed to encourage participation and a sharing environment. It used a series of related questions to guide discussions. The intended result was answers to the following questions:

- What are the most important lessons and experiences about Cambodian development that you want to share with the other generations?
- What question do you most want to ask the other generations?
- What can each generation learn from others?
- What is the most important thing that your generation can contribute to Cambodia's future development?
- What can all the generations do together to contribute to Cambodia's development?

3.4 Approaches

In an attempt to give participants the opportunity to talk together purposefully and comfortably, the conference was designed using three simple approaches: cafe discussion, personal journaling and plenary sharing of learning. The detailed programme activities are attached in Appendix 2.

3.4.1 Cafe Discussion

The cafe model for conversation was applied throughout the two days of the conference. The participants were seated together at small round cafe-style tables (five people per table) to make them feel safe and comfortable in discussing.

Step 1 of the conference (on the morning of day one) suggested that participants sit by age groups, working together on two questions:



- What are the most important lessons and experiences about Cambodian development that you want to share with the other generations?
- What question do you most want to ask the other generations?

At each small table, participants were instructed to select one person to represent their group. That person acted as a host for the second round of cafe discussion and sharing.

After an hour spent on these questions, participants move to a different table in the same age group, so that the larger group was mixed together in different small groups and all ideas were spread from table to table.



Step 2 (on the afternoon of day one) gave an opportunity to different age groups to share with each other their experiences, concerns and questions. The participants were arranged to sit in mixed age groups, at tables of five persons, discussing:

- The output of each age group.
- What issues are similar and different among different age groups? (What are common issues that each group has identified?)

The same process was repeated again on day two, using two guide questions:

- What is the most important thing that your generation can contribute to Cambodia's future development?—for participants working in the same age group.
- What can all the generations do together to contribute to Cambodia's development?—for participants working in mixed age groups.

3.4.2 Personal Journaling



The agenda set aside time for participants to write personal journals of the most important experiences and events they encountered during the discussion and sharing.

This activity occurred in the afternoon session after a break. Participants were given guidance on how to journal through two reference questions:

- What was heard from others?
- What was their perception of what they heard?

Each participant was then given an opportunity to share his or her personal journaling with others if s/he wished.

3.4.3 Plenary Sharing of Learning

At the end of day one, participants in each age group were given time to wrap up and select and prepare important learning of the day (to be shared in a plenary). Plenary sharing of learning was done twice on day two.

The first sharing was in the day's beginning session. Each age group shared the most important experiences and learning from day one and questions that it wanted to ask the others. The first sharing was done as role play as a metaphor to describe their learning and concerns.

The second sharing, at the end of day two, focussed on two guide questions:

- What had each generation learned from the others?
- What can all generations do together to contribute to Cambodia's development?

While the middle age group used flip charts to write their ideas, the young and old groups drew pictures and mind-maps of their ideas for sharing. The three age groups then conducted gallery walk to see and discuss the others' output.



4. Facilitators' Reflection

4.1 Themes

In general the facilitators felt that the topics were relevant and suited to the current development situation of Cambodia. Although the discussion among the participants seemed broad, it gave an opportunity to different generations to recall their life experience, explore and share in a safe and equal atmosphere.

Day one seemed a bit challenging as different generations tried to blame each other. However, the day two sessions encouraged them to listen more and learn from each other.



The presentation from each generation was clearly expressed and confidently spoken.

It is interesting to note that at the end of the conference the three participants groups all expressed interest and concern about similar development issues. Those common issues included education, culture and current morality. They all concluded that a close collaboration between all generations would help sustainable development of the country.

4.2 Process

A warm welcome from facilitators, flexible methods and clear instructions for the whole conference created a safe and friendly atmosphere for participants to discuss and share their experiences.

It was confirmed that the cafe discussion fitted the current development situation and encouraged participation. Moving participants between tables, although it seemed a bit difficult for the older participants, suited well the youth and middle groups. It allowed participants to approach those they wanted to communicate with on certain issues of development. We noted that the women participants were more brave and assertive.

Small-group discussion and sharing in the plenary gave the opportunity to discuss across issues and experiences from all age groups. We were very impressed with the creative methods and approaches applied by participants in sharing their learning in the starting session of day two. They were all very active in sharing ideas and supporting each other. A role play prepared by the old and young groups was excellent; it truly reflected the moral issues in current development in Cambodia. It also highlighted that the perception of Cambodian development needs has changed from the physical to the mental.

Personal journaling forced participants to think deeply, analyse and write down the learning that was useful and meaningful for them. However, this approach caused a problem for a few old participants who are illiterate.

Time was a bit of a constraint for some sessions. More time would have allowed greater depth for discussion. This was addressed by both participants and facilitators. The participants wrote their comments in evaluation forms suggesting extending the conference to three days.

5. Participants' Evaluation

At the end of the conference, we asked participants four questions:

- What is your overall level of satisfaction?
- What did you enjoy about the conference?
- What were the most interesting points?
- What suggestions do you have about other conferences?

The majority of participants responded to the questions. The detailed responses are in Appendix 3.

5.1 Overall Satisfaction

We asked participants to express their level of satisfaction with the following statements.⁴ Highlights of the responses were:

- The conference gave an opportunity to share learning and relevant experiences (about development in Cambodia) among different generations—54 highly satisfied.
- The conference gave an opportunity to learn relevant experiences (about development in Cambodia) from different generations—51 highly satisfied.
- The conference gave an opportunity to identify key areas in which each generation can work together to contribute to develop Cambodia—55 highly satisfied.

5.2 What Participants Enjoyed

The greatest number of responses were about the opportunity to meet different people, to exchange experiences and learn from different age groups regarding development. The cafe-style discussion enhanced participation and promoted face-to-face discussion, especially between young and old people.

5.3 Most Interesting Points

A high number were impressed by the active participation of the attendees and the common ideas that all generations reached at the end of the conference. Comments raised by all three groups were: the need for all generations to work together to contribute to the development of Cambodia; and the need to open more communication between all ages.

Other participants indicated that their most interesting points were methodologies for conference activities (especially the cafe discussion), the title (dialogue between generations) and the opportunity for them to learn from others about social issues.

5.4 Comments for Next Conference

Some participants were in favour of VBNK organising similar conferences in the future. They gave suggestions about duration, participants, methodologies and locations, in particular to hold one in a province outside Phnom Penh. Others commented about logistics and requested handouts and conference documentation.

4. There were 81 participants in the conference, but only 74 completed the evaluation form.

6. Conclusion

The focus of the conference was a dialogue between generations. The conference activities helped participants spell out their experiences and concerns to each other and to find common interests and ways that generations can work together to support sustainable development.

The conference approaches fitted the current context of development and created an atmosphere to maximise participation. They made for a relaxing environment and helped participants to think deeply and feel confident in sharing and raising issues and concerns with each other.

Conference evaluations suggested that most of the participants were very impressed with the event. Their evaluations pointed out that they appreciated the opportunity to be involved, share and learn different experiences and knowledge from different generations regarding Cambodian development. The evaluations confirmed that the conference objectives were largely met.