

Learning for Capacity Development: A holistic approach to sustained organisational change

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Abstract

VBNK's holistic approach to organisational change offers an alternative approach to capacity development of Cambodian NGOs through processes that promote learning and its integration into everyday work practices. This paper follows up on an earlier account (Pearson 2010) to show firstly, that the approach does have positive and lasting outcomes, leading to more resilient organisations; and secondly, that it can be adapted to working with a number of organisations simultaneously or with single organisations. We believe these lessons have relevance for capacity development efforts in other contexts and for how development practitioners and donors alike can better support those efforts.

Background

This paper is a report of the effectiveness of VBNK's holistic approach to organisational capacity development. It follows up on an earlier account of the approach in a paper about integrating learning into capacity development of Cambodian NGOs (Pearson 2010) and summarizes VBNK's activities, experiences, challenges and lessons learnt with this approach over the past seven years, from 2004 to 2010.

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

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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.

ICCO, the Dutch inter-church organisation for development cooperation, has been active in Cambodia since 1988. It has supported both international and local development organisations, giving core funding, including budget allocations for organisational and staff development, and other forms of support and advice.

The paper starts by explaining the need for alternative approaches to organisational development in the Cambodian development context. It then elaborates on earlier descriptions of VBNK's holistic approach to organisational capacity development, which emerged from a 3-year project VBNK conducted in partnership with the Interchurch Organisation for Development Cooperation (ICCO) between 2004 and 2008 (VBNK 2008a, VBNK 2008b and Pearson 2010). The paper then compares findings from the end-of-project evaluation of the ICCO partners project (VBNK 2008a) with a follow up study conducted one year later (VBNK 2009) to investigate longer-term impacts. The paper concludes by demonstrating how VBNK moved forward with this approach and how it has been applied in other settings.

The Context

While many Cambodian NGOs *"have impressive track records of achievement, cultural factors, poor ability to adapt and change, and perceptions of donor requirements keep many CNGOs trapped in ways of thinking and doing that inhibit their capacity to develop and respond"* to the complexities of today's rapidly changing environment (Pearson 2010). To overcome these blocks, capacity development has to be viewed as a means of encouraging learning *for* development (ECDPM 2008) and should build on approaches that combine consultation, coaching and peer-peer exchanges with training services (Ebrahim 2009).

Unfortunately, learning for development is hampered in the Cambodian context because experience is not seen as a valid source of learning (Pearson 2010). Instead there is a 'delusion

of learning from experience' (Senge 1994). Theory that is taught in classrooms is valued over action-oriented learning that might aggravate and unsettle the status quo. Unfortunately, this theory is too often removed from practical realities and grounded experience, so that taught topics and techniques are often "of limited relevance to Cambodia's development needs" (Meas and McCallum, 2009:13) and not readily translated into workplace practice. Additionally, a fear of punishment and of losing face by getting it 'wrong' along with a general suspicion of change mean that many Cambodians have come to exhibit extreme cautiousness in public activities (O'Leary and Meas 2001; Knowles 2009; and Leng and Pearson 2006). This acts as a powerful inhibitor of initiative and flexibility. Not surprisingly, most Cambodians believe it is better by far to follow the rules, or, if in doubt, to do nothing (Pearson 2010).

These factors combine to create organisations that have severe difficulties with learning and change, except when change is imposed externally as occurs, for example, when a recipient organisation 'learns the ropes' and adopts a new set of values and ways of working so as to respond to the requirements of a funding organisation (Pearson 2010). This kind of "regressive" learning (Shutt in Eyben 2006) along with funding pressures leads many Cambodian NGOs to unquestioningly comply with donor conditions, which frequently overrides any possibility of learning from experience if it in any way differs from the pre-defined activities and expected project outcomes (Pearson 2010).

A brief history

The holistic approach to organisational development referred to in this paper came about when VBNK partnered with the ICCO in 2004 to improve the financial and organisational capacity of eighteen of ICCO's Cambodian partner organisations.

Prior to approaching VBNK, ICCO had undertaken an evaluation of the capacity of its partner organisations with the aim of better understanding the effectiveness of their funding approach in supporting capacity-building efforts (VBNK 2008a). The evaluation found that efforts to

support staff and organisational development activities (primarily through training) had not produced the hoped for and much needed improvements in organisational capacity (VBNK 2008a). Many of ICCO's partners had significant areas of weakness in some of the basic and essential aspects of their operations and required significant, additional capacity building support (VBNK 2008a). For learning to be effective, ICCO found, there must be a planned and substantive follow-up to training as an intrinsic part of capacity building initiatives (VBNK 2008a).

Two premises guided VBANK in designing the approach:

- First, further one-off training and organisational development interventions would be unlikely to achieve significant and sustainable growth in organisational capacity for ICCO's partner organisations.
- Second, because capacity development is dependent upon a complex set of interdependent factors operating at individual, organisational and environmental levels, there was a need to adopt a holistic approach and work with the whole system.

The approach combined a range of capacity building intervention tailored to each organisations' individual needs and included workplace follow up and on-the job coaching to promote learning and its application into everyday work practices. Learning forums allowed the partner organisations to celebrate each others' successes and learn from each other. At the same time the approach set out to identify and work with factors that are impacted by the organisations' internal environment and ability (or willingness) to adapt and change.

The ICCO Partners Project (IPP)

The objectives for ICCO's partners during the project were twofold: the first was to enhance their capacity to manage and report on their finances in a consistent manner, which would both help them manage their activities more effectively and fulfil external requirements for good

practice standards. The second was to strengthen organisational capacity and management in line with the co-assessment of priority capacity development needs.

To achieve these objectives the project was conducted in three phases. Between June 2005 and February 2006, Phase I saw the co-assessment of organisational capacity development needs for each partner organisation. This process of co-assessing organisational development needs and co-creating plans to address these needs allowed for the design of interventions that were flexible in meeting the changing needs of each organisation. Important to this phase was also to build trustful relationships between the VBNK facilitators and the ICCO partner organisations.

In phase II, which ran from March 2006 to March 2008, VBNK delivered a wide range of financial and organisational capacity building interventions tailored to the individual needs of each partner as identified in phase I. Opportunities to build specific financial and development management skills included on-site workshops, training, coaching and follow-up activities. Progress was assessed and reviewed and plans adjusted as necessary along the way. Participants were accountable for evaluating their own practices and their organisations' structures, policies and procedures, and for making decisions about how to improve individual and organisational practice. This allowed the partners to take ownership of the interventions. VBNK facilitators/coaches offered systematic and ongoing support to the partners in this phase.

The learning process operated at three levels:

- The individual (enhancing knowledge and skills essential to improving workplace performance);
- The organisational (improving structures and work processes, and ensuring more effective use of available resources); and
- The internal enabling environmental (through upgrading policies and procedures, and working with the leadership teams so that they actively champion the change process and create a more enabling learning environment).

Regular opportunities for reflection contributed to ongoing learning and course correction, through the use of an Action-Reflection-Learning-Planning tool (Taylor *et al*, 1999), and plenary sessions to encourage cross learning and to help participants expand their understanding of a whole systems (holistic) approach to organisational change. The emphasis on reflective practice ensured that learning was deepened and embedded in workplace practice (VBNK 2008a).

From March 2008 until September 2008, the final phase aimed to consolidate and finalise the interventions implemented in phase II, and to provide select organisations with follow-up interventions in remaining priority areas (VBNK 2008a).

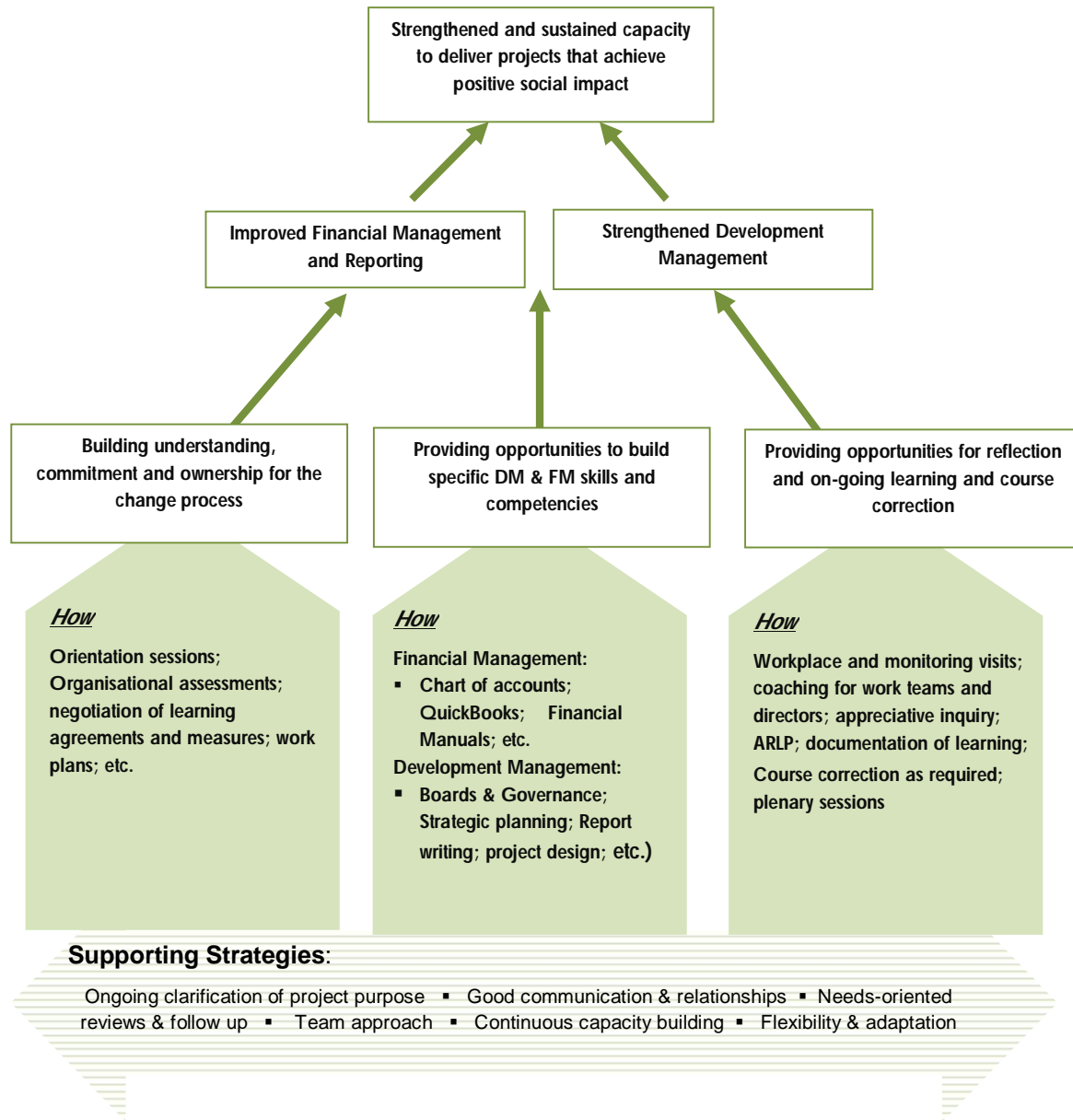
Theory of Change

The theory of change developed for the project provided a map of how the individual activities that make up the project would produce certain learning outcomes along the way and how these steps would direct the partner organisations towards their destination of long-term organisational change. Three preconditions to long-term change and to achieving the two project objectives were identified:

- Building understanding, commitment and ownership for the change process
- Providing opportunities to build specific competence and confidence
- Providing opportunities for reflection and ongoing learning and process review

The linkages and assumptions behind the IPP theory of change are shown below:

Figure 1 IPP theory of change



Precondition 1: Building understanding, commitment and ownership for the change process

It was important to help organisations recognise why they needed to focus on both sustainability and resilience and what it would take to achieve this end. To do this, the intervention team started with the essential changes that the organisations recognised, then through growing awareness, shared how the changes they were making in one area affected the whole organisation and ultimately the communities the organisations serve.

IPP participants described that this helped them understand and visualise the complexity of organisational management and how different components of the management system are interrelated and interact with each other ('seeing the bigger picture'). The role of individual staff in these complex organisational systems was highlighted and the potential each individual staff member has to influence positive change within her/his organisation was emphasised. At the same time emphasis was given to engaging other staff in any change intervention. This allowed for a coordinated approach to building understanding, commitment and ownership for the process of change. It also allowed staff members at all levels to develop a clear understanding of the purposes of the intervention, demonstrable commitment to the process and a stake in their own learning and change (VBNK 2008a).

Some partners felt that in this process they gained knowledge that allowed them to self-assess more accurately current organisational and financial strengths and weaknesses, and that they learned to trust the facilitators to assist this process. This was demonstrated by an increased openness and willingness to engage in dialogue with facilitators on organisational challenges – to bring their laundry into public view – and thereby breakthrough cultural barriers that inhibit learning through mistakes.

Precondition 2: Provide opportunities to build specific competence and confidence (through on-site workshops, trainings and follow up activities).

Meeting this precondition to lasting organisational change required translating learning into action, with the engagement of directors playing a pivotal role in the successful application of training and new skills.

While managers were able to demonstrate improvements in organisational policies and procedures, directors did not always understand or appreciate the benefit of implementing them. Some directors simply did not abide by them. Cultural issues were also apparent as managers expressed concern about appearing boastful when they shared their new learning or recommendations for changes to their director.

In organisations where senior managers did not support implementation of learning, changes did not happen, regardless of what the staff had learned. Where directors could not change their leadership style or approach staff members quickly lost any motivation to apply their learning.

Precondition 3: Establishing a learning culture by providing opportunities for reflection and ongoing learning and process review

Throughout the project the delivery team drew on various techniques to support the development of an organisational learning culture. These included coaching, plenary sessions to encourage peer learning, creative processes and reflective learning.

Through using the participatory and ARLP-based design, participants learned to recognise and build on their own existing knowledge and problem solving skills. Every facilitated event or training session was followed up by workplace visits during which participants could analyse and resolve the challenges of implementing new learning. Two formal reviews of the learning objectives and indicators with each partner provided an opportunity for ongoing monitoring

and evaluation. The reviews were designed to be supportive to the partners, by focusing on reflective practice rather than inspection. The 'stories of change' method was particularly appreciated because it allowed individual staff to identify their own changes and to recognise how they were contributing to the organisational whole. Four plenary sessions and three financial management workshops were held in the core implementation phase for selected representatives of each partner. This provided the partners with opportunities to share and learn together from their experiences; to consolidate their learning; and to become more confident about what they were doing. This emphasis on reflective practice ensured that the learning was deepened and embedded in workplace practice.

Achievements of the ICCO Partners Project (IPP)

After the ICCO Partners Project (IPP) came to a close in late 2008, an end-of-project evaluation (VBNK 2008a) examined the extent to which the project's objectives were achieved. Specifically the evaluation looked at the areas of overall impact, effectiveness of approach and methodologies, cost effectiveness, and the resulting key learning for VBANK, ICCO, its partners and others.

The end-of-project-evaluation noted that, dependent on the issues prioritised for attention, a range of important individual, system, organisational and programme level changes could be identified within the different partner organisations. Three broad conclusions were identified:

First, capacity development through learning was seen by many of the partners as an important long-term strategy, and some had integrated it into their strategic plans or had adopted learning as an organisational value.

Second, organisations understand that individual and organisational development through learning could both improve the quality of programme delivery and contribute to long-term sustainability.

Third, there was evidence that some partners, through their experience of being in a facilitated learning process during IPP, had changed their own practice of facilitation in their work with communities.

Concrete outcomes with respect to behavioural and systems changes identified included:

- Staff members demonstrated increased skills and confidence in doing their jobs and were applying the newly-acquired skills into their work.
- Several organisations had, for the first time, developed and were drawing on comprehensive strategic plans to guide organisational growth and decision making.
- As a result of new understanding of 'good' practice, partners were upgrading various policies and operational guidelines.
- Relationships and communications between finance and programme departments within organisations had improved sufficiently to reduce misunderstanding and conflict in the application of financial procedures.
- Partners had developed sound accounting systems and financial manuals were in place, which had contributed to improved internal control systems. These improvements were acknowledged by donors.

Learning about blocks to change

Despite the overall success, the IPP project was not without challenges. A comprehensive list and discussion of the challenges can be found in the end-of-project evaluation (VBNK 2008a, 2008b). Two blocks to achieving sustained organisational change and resilience were identified as particularly significant (VBNK 2008b):

1. ***Organisational readiness*** to embrace learning and change.

2. **Resistance to change** when long-held cultural norms and expectations about learning and embedded hierarchy are challenged with participatory approaches (see context).

In fact, **Organisational readiness**, largely determined by the attitudes and actions of an organisation's leadership, emerged as the primary indicator of future success.

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

Employee from partner organisation

But understanding the readiness of an organisation to implement change is often overlooked in change planning. Without fully understanding the environment within which a change is to be implemented, change management strategies and plans cannot be implemented or sustained. Commitment to learning and change both by the whole organisation and by individuals within the organisation is essential to the success of any change process. Poor engagement with learning and change processes is, in large part, determined by the attitudes and actions of an organisation's leadership. In organisations where senior managers will not support implementation of learning, changes do not happen, regardless of what the staff member has learned. Where directors can not change their leadership style or approach, then staff members quickly lose any motivation to apply their learning.

The ability to identify and engage with **resistance to change** is a second critical success factor. The participatory nature of the approach often challenges prevailing assumptions about how to learn and expectations that trainers and facilitators are the experts who would provide the right answers. Where the participants are new to being in facilitated processes some find it difficult to participate fully and contribute their own ideas. Others find it difficult to leave the comfort zone of their old habits, especially when it involves introducing new systems. Only

when a foundation of understanding and trust are developed (see theory of change preconditions: building understanding, commitment and ownership for the change process) will shifts in attitudes and behaviour happen that support a commitment to the change process (VBNK 2008b).

One year later: Were changes sustained over time?

The long-term nature of capacity development coupled with the early stage at which the end-of-project evaluation was conducted made it difficult to establish the long-term impact of the IPP. While the end-of-project evaluation provided an early indication of the immediate impact of the project, there were no indications of what further changes could be expected in the future or whether the organisational changes achieved could be sustained over time once the project team had withdrawn (VBNK 2008a). To redress this shortfall, a follow-up evaluation was carried out one year after the IPP came to a close.

The follow up study was conducted as part of VBNK's Annual Impact Assessment in fall 2009, approximately one year after the ICCO partner project ended. The evaluation team was made up of two VBNK staff and an external consultant, who was engaged to work alongside VBNK staff. The evaluation team met with managers and staff from six of the original eighteen local partners – two from Phnom Penh and four from the provinces – who had participated in the IPP. Using appreciative inquiry and in-depth interviews the evaluation team set out to ask more specifically: Over time, had the participating organisations continued to strengthen their capacities to achieve their mission? What, if any, new changes had occurred? [How] had these effected positive social change?

Indeed the follow up study revealed indications of both sustained change and strengthened capacities. It also closed the loop on previously identified blocks and necessary preconditions (noted above). The findings re-confirmed that organisational readiness to embrace learning

and change; and understanding, commitment and ownership of the change process are indeed the primary indicators of future success.

As noted above, some managers expressed concern about appearing boastful when they shared their new learning or made recommendations for changes to their director. Equally obstructive was the cultural belief that if you show that you know something that your boss doesn't know it will cause him or her to lose face, and you could expect to lose your job as a result (Leng and Pearson 2006). Such fears are commonplace and are among the most powerful factors consistently blocking change, initiative and risk taking. Thus in the Cambodian context, organisational readiness is largely determined by the director and/or senior managers' willingness to adopt a non-hierarchical leadership style and to champion change.

The long-term achievements of the ICCO Partners Project are summarised in the next section.

Long-term achievements of the IPP: Sustained change and more resilient organisations

A key finding indicating sustained change and enhanced capacity one year after the ICCO Partners Project ended is the importance that is now given to empowerment within the organisations and how this has allowed staff to take ownership and take positive risks (to 'try out' their learning) in performing their assigned work. Such empowerment required a shift in leadership style and willingness to delegate, which the follow-up evaluation found prevailed in all six organisations participating in the follow up evaluation. This in turn has allowed 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.

Employee from partner organisation

Directors of the participating partner organisations were able to elaborate increased awareness and understanding of their leadership role in working effectively with staff, of the importance of engaging staff in decision-making and in supporting them to learn from mistakes, and of the significance of delegating tasks. Separate conversations with staff confirm these factors as being critical in enhancing their commitment to the organisation's mission. They expressed their belief that the main factor behind those changes in leadership style are the participatory approaches used during the intervention that brought all staff and leaders together to openly discuss and exchange ideas and to plan a course for action.

I am confident with the effectiveness and efficiency of my team. They now have ability to work fast and need less guidance and support from me. They are very committed to and responsible for their job. I can conclude their performance is far better than before. This was because of the knowledge and skills gained from IPP and ongoing coaching from me.

Director from partner organisation

Several participants further reported that the IPP approach had allowed them to 'join the dots' and see the bigger picture of their organisation and that this has increased their motivation to work for the organisations' goals. There was also a better understanding and articulation of the complexity of organisational management and how different management processes are interrelated and interact with each other. As a result participants reported that they were increasingly involved in organisational matters from other work units because these would also impact the requirements of their own work. They were motivated to understand how specific changes in their own departments would impact other components of the organisational system. With such abilities the participants claimed to have increased their confidence to manage and revise their management systems to accommodate changes, a key indicator for organisational resilience.

I not only take care of the financial affairs, but also involve in project and organizational matters. Through this involvement I know well what happen in the organization so that I can better prepare budget for respective projects, provide finance-related advice to project staff, and help director in solving other organizational issues.

Employee from partner organisation

A third area that indicates sustained capacities well after the project came to a close, is that continuous learning was regarded in many organisations as fundamental for building a sustainable and resilient organisation.

Examples given by the participating organisations were the adoption of participatory approaches across a range of areas such as project design processes that now involve a wider range of stakeholders including beneficiaries. Examples of continuous organisational learning were apparent in the commitments organisations are now making to regular reflection meetings; the space and opportunities they are providing to the application of learning; and most importantly, a feeling that the organisational leadership is empowering staff to take risks when applying learning. In addition, all respondents expressed that they sincerely value ongoing learning and the knowledge and skills they gained from the IPP as a good foundation to build on to further increase their capacities in the future.

We changed the way to develop a project and writing proposals. In the past, the director prepared project proposal based on worn ideas and limited information about issues of the target group. Now we develop projects based on the reflection on completed projects, consultation with target group, and project staff. Everyone was involved in the project design and I write up the proposal to submit to donors. As a result, we gained more participation and collaboration from target group in project implementation. I am more and more confident of proposal development and report writing.

Employee from partner organisation

Delivering projects that achieve positive social impact

An assumption that underpins the theory of change is that if the preconditions to learning and change are established and if organisational effectiveness is increased through strengthened capacity, this will in turn result in notable improvements in the services delivered to communities. There are limitations to an assessment of community impact (the difficulties of attribution, and factors outside the scope of the project). Nevertheless, the organisations participating in the follow up study referred to positive changes in the quality and effectiveness of services being provided to communities, as demonstrated by, for example, enhanced

accountability to the needs of communities in terms of project quality and transparency; and increased community participation in decision-making.

Now if donors want to visit the project area, the beneficiary at the community can guide and answer visitors' questions. They are more responsible and gaining a sense of ownership because project is responsive to their priority. The underlying reason is that the organisation has involved them in the design, orientation session, and now in implementation. The beneficiary was happy with the result of the project. They said that before the project, their families had frequent disputation and argument and did not listen to each other, now they stopped arguing and have happiness. They stopped suffering from domestic violence. They suggested delivering the project to other families in nearby community who have serious argument and violence.

Employee from partner organisation

Applying the holistic approach to organisational learning and change to other contexts

Within VBNK the experiences of, and learning from, IPP activities have contributed to learning throughout the organisation. Drawing on these lessons learned, VBNK has been moving forward in applying the approach to our capacity development work with other organisations.

While the IPP operated over several years with 18 organisations simultaneously and therefore needed a large team of dedicated trainers/facilitators with a diverse range of expertise, the following examples demonstrate that the approach can be applied to individual small- and medium-sized Cambodian NGOs and to INGOs with considerably fewer resources.

In 2008, VBNK conducted a capacity assessment for an international NGO working through ten local partners to implement its sexual and reproductive health programme. A holistic organisational assessment was conducted to identify organisational strengths as well as areas for improvement to help the partners set an agenda for change. As the INGO was faced with pressure from its donor to promote robust and transparent HR and financial practices – in fact continued funding was contingent upon this – determining organisational readiness was a critical factor in the assessment. This opened the way for the INGO, partners and VBNK to talk about expectations (what would success look like and what was non-negotiable) and the importance of being open to new learning. One of the directors was not ready to talk about the

organisation's weaknesses or to accept that he could learn through the co-assessment process and so elected not to move to the next step. VBNK was subsequently commissioned by the INGO to work further with the nine identified partners to facilitate the approach to organisational development described above. This involved working with the leadership of each organisation to help them develop and communicate the business case for addressing the identified areas for change.

The approach has also been applied to working with single organisations. Early in 2010 VBNK applied its learning to a localisation study for a large water and sanitation programme to provide guidance to the programme itself about how it might evolve and to the parent NGO and international donor who had not been able to reconcile their different positions and interests. The data generated through the participatory assessment was presented under three broad themes – sustainability and resilience, transparency and accountability, and programme quality and impact – and led to a change map that satisfied each of the stakeholders' needs and allowed them to move forward.

A third piece of work began when VBNK conducted a comprehensive and participatory organisational assessment with a Cambodian NGO providing health care to poor urban communities. The local NGO had recently localised, and the 'mother' organisation (an international NGO) and the local NGO wanted to review the effectiveness and efficiency of the organisation's performance since its localisation and to use the findings to chart next steps. VBNK approached this assessment in a holistic way, identifying capacity issues in the entire organisational system. These included a set of recommendations for the 'mother' NGO about the need for and how to let go and also about clarifying the structure and roles of the board. The assessment also produced several key findings that have been the basis for subsequent capacity building interventions and ongoing coaching for the staff of the local NGO. The organisation itself claims that the assessment has helped it to move forward in pinpointing and addressing blockages and coming up with own solutions for moving closer to realising its vision and mission.

"...the VBNK team conducted a very thorough and comprehensive organisational analysis with... local Cambodian NGO providing health care to very poor urban communities. ...the in-depth analysis, and ...realistic, insightful recommendations ...have really helped us to move forward in pinpointing blockages, and therefore are helping us to move closer to realising our vision and mission."

Chairman of the Board of a Cambodian NGO providing health care to poor urban communities

Conclusion and future application

The longitudinal evaluation study described here confirms earlier findings: when an organisation is both willing and able to engage with a holistic approach to organisational learning and change, (a) the results are significantly better than any produced by external one-off training programmes; and (b) both individual staff and the whole organisation are able to function more effectively. Moreover, if leadership and senior management support the promotion of learning and its integration into every day work practices, change can be sustained over time, organisations can strengthen their capacities to achieve their mission and this can lead to effecting positive social change. This finding confirms our belief that capacity development needs to take place at multiple levels in the organisation – the individual, organisational and environmental – for learning to take root. The study also shows that the approach can be adapted to working with a number of organisations simultaneously or with single small and large organisations.

While this paper has discussed the application of a holistic approach to organisational learning and change in the Cambodian context, we believe the lessons here have relevance for organisational development efforts in other contexts and for how capacity development practitioners and donors alike can better support them. One obvious implication is the need to move beyond short-term, one-off organisational development interventions and conventional approaches to staff development (where one or two staff members are sent on short training courses) into processes that promote learning and its integration into everyday work practices. This in turn requires a longer-term commitment to a process of change and to multi-year funding streams.

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