Development and Communities: A View from Cambodia's Buddhist Temples

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It would be hard to imagine a more complex array of development challenges than those facing Cambodia. During the brutal civil war and genocide of the 1970s, the lives and institutions of Cambodia were shattered and perhaps two million people died at the hands of the murderous Khmer Rouge regime. The effects of this protracted period of instability can be seen and felt everywhere. The public school system is still in shambles. The health system lacks critical supplies, there are far too few skilled professionals, and most poor Cambodians have no access to modern health care. Cambodia's extraordinary challenges include a virtual rebuilding of its religious institutions, as Buddhism, the religion of most Cambodians, was outlawed during the Khmer Rouge time and countless monks were slaughtered.

As one of Southeast Asia's least developed countries (2008 per capita GNI of US$610), and a well known post conflict society, Cambodia attracts special attention and resources from global leaders and civil society. Cambodia is thus a hub and reference point for an uncounted number (well in the thousands) of local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs); they work on program areas from health and education to demining and sanitation. Their record is mixed: in this extraordinarily difficult working environment, blending the energies and resources of well-intentioned groups with the complex realities of very diverse local hopes and constraints is never easy. One of the challenges that comes up time and time again is how to match hard-learned international development experience with the unique needs of a given community.

Many of the programs and organizations working in Cambodia focus on creating local community-based organizations, or CBOs, in order to tackle a specific challenge (say building a school or a water and sanitation system). This CBO focus reflects one of the most robust "learnings" of 60 plus years of international development experience: that without the true commitment of local communities, without real understanding of their needs and culture, and without mechanisms that foster community engagement, no lasting improvement in peoples' lives can take place. The themes of empowerment and community-driven development are not hard to find on any NGO website. But doing it well is far easier said than done.

The approaches of international NGOs, especially, are fairly straightforward: go into a community, identity individuals willing to be put onto a committee, train the committee, offer incentives to members, and check-in on a regular schedule to ensure that the committee is carrying out its duties. Most CBO workers are volunteers (not paid), and many organizations support them with small per-diems, usually in the form of rice or money for transportation. This CBO model is one repeated in developing nations worldwide. It is seen as the path to effectiveness in mobilizing resources and citizen participation at the grass-roots level.

To be sure, the efforts of CBOs often show considerable success. But critical traps abound and they contribute to a host of gaps between ideals and realities. For instance, there is the issue of overlapping priorities. Two organizations, whose operational territories intersect, may each have their own CBO working on the same issue. In some communities, volunteers may work for multiple CBOs, stretching themselves thin and taking up volunteer slots where others might have gotten involved. Moreover, development organizations may find themselves competing to

distribute the most lucrative per-diem, aware that some volunteers sign up with the organization offering the greatest rewards.

The World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD), an organization based at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, is concluding a year-long exploration of the contributions of faith-inspired actors and organizations to addressing Cambodia's development challenges.This review is turning up robust evidence that indeed community engagement is vital. But it also suggests that the all too common top-down approach to creating CBOs needs to be rethought. Those who want to help Cambodia need to pay more attention to the often neglected opportunity to work with existing grass-roots structures. Many of these have some kind of faith link. They can serve as powerful tools in implementing community-driven development projects. No one should imagine that this is easy: the structures are as diverse as can be, they are deeply human institutions, and, like other Cambodian institutions, they are rebuilding from a shattered base. But the potential benefits are enormous.

"Community development has been hijacked by NGOs," says Arnaldo Pellini, a community development specialist who has spent more than a decade studying Cambodia. "Their approach is, 'I go into an area, I am the teacher, I set up a committee, I do elections.' There is limited investigation of the values of the [pagoda] associations, and that has been going on for a long time." Pellini believes international development groups are too focused on setting up new committees and are not giving enough attention to working with established mechanisms for community organizing.

Take the evidence of the situation in Cambodia where home-grown community groups called pagoda associations have sprung forth around Buddhist temples, or pagodas. The German international development group,*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit*, or GTZ, in working with the pagoda associations, found that these structures offered a real chance to make a big impact on improving the lives of whole communities. It also brought home a reality that international organizations are increasingly acknowledging (sometimes rather grudgingly): that it is hard to discuss "home grown" locally organized community groups without bumping up against faith linkages.

Pagodas were historically the social, cultural, and religious centers of community life. People gathered there during holidays, pagodas housed and often ran schools where youth and adults learned to read and write, and they were and remain the symbol of the Cambodian identity (just look at the currency). Because pagodas draw on whole communities for activities and events, they emerge quite logically as the best available organizing mechanisms.

The plethora of social capital centered on the pagodas, notes Pellini, is what supports the creation of more structured associations that can meet modern development demands. Designed around mutual self-help activities, they are practicing the Buddha's teaching that "people must save themselves, by their own effort." Although no reliable figures exist on the numbers of pagoda associations in Cambodia, the diversity of interests they cater to – temple maintenance associations, health associations, school associations, and funeral associations, to name just a few – suggests that they already fulfill many needs.

GTZ began a systematic study of these pagoda associations in 1995, concentrating on one administrative district in the province of Kampong Thom in Cambodia's central region. The focus was on associations that provide small loans in the form of rice and cash to members. The associations varied in size from 50 to 200 members, with an average of 120. GTZ identified 29 different types of associations linked to the nearly 200 pagodas in Kampong Thom.

Inspired by the study's conclusions, GTZ refocused their effort to work to increase the capacity of the groups. The purpose was twofold: to see greater returns in capital amongst members and to help link the groups with existing government structures so that members had more of a voice in local governance. This approach was, in many ways, a radical departure from the time-honored practice of creating CBOs, because rather than build a new system, GTZ strengthened existing resources within community groups.

An overarching reason why these pagoda associations have been so successful is that in having formed the groups themselves, people feel a greater sense of responsibility and a stronger connection to the group. Wayne McCallum and Meas Nee, authors of a recent book on development challenges in Cambodia, sum up the necessity for

development organizations to utilize and build upon existing systems. They write, "understanding the concept of people's participation 'from within' is crucial, as this will promote people's sense of ownership right from the beginning of the project."

The fact that these local grass-roots groups have a faith component has added benefits. GTZ found, for instance, that management of these groups is often more trusted because members work primarily for merit and not profit. This assessment mirrors research which suggests faith-inspired organizations, in general, tend to be the most trusted organizations in developing nations. More broadly, it opens the window on the unique opportunities faith institutions present for tackling challenging issues.

This small but significant effort to work with the pagoda associations affirms the importance of working within traditional beliefs and value structures to realize developmental goals. The ethos of secular grass-roots groups and those organized around faith principles, it would seem, enjoy numerous overlapping traits; traits which, when deftly leveraged with a clear development focus in mind, are poised to produce meaningful benefits for entire communities.

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