

# Cambodia's Ecological Sustainability:

Organizational Case Study of Cambodia's Ministry of Environment (MoE)  
by Cor Veer

*IDRC support to build the research capacities of a broad base of actors involved in the policy making process addresses wider governance challenges to improve environment and natural resource management (ENRM) in Cambodia.*

Cambodia's emergence from two decades of mass violence opened a new era marked by fresh opportunities—but also profound challenges. After the UN-organized elections of 1993, the country's economy grew considerably, poverty began to drop, and some positive outcomes were reported in health and education.

Within this context of change and transformation, IDRC saw the potential to help improve the circumstances of Cambodia's poor while avoiding the environmental degradation that might be expected to accompany an economic boom. Since 80 per cent of Cambodia's 14 million citizens are rural people dependent upon agriculture and natural resources, IDRC reasoned that ensuring the sustainability of the resource base would be critical for ensuring livelihoods for the rural poor.

But there were obstacles to this goal. Re-building public administration at the local, provincial and national levels has been a massive challenge affecting all sectors including environment and natural resource management. In addition, Cambodia's political economy has traditionally been distinguished by a complex social web of relationships based on hierarchy and authority. In the natural resources sector, there was evidence in the early 1990s that this system of political patronage was leading to the consolidation of land and resource ownership by the wealthy, with the poor increasingly marginalized. Despite a program of governance reform and decentralization of power, Cambodia remained a difficult country in which to seek more equitable resource management.

## The search for entry points

The Ministry of Environment (MoE) was established in 1993 with a broad mandate to promote environmental protection and natural resource conservation. The multi-or inter-sectoral nature of environment has meant that the Ministry has had to grow into its role over time, establishing effective relationships with a wide range of governmental and non-governmental actors working on 'green, blue and brown' issues (forests and protected areas; water resources and fisheries; and mineral resources and land management).

The development of over-arching policies and the importance of collaboration and coordination became focal points for IDRC's capacity development efforts with the Ministry. According to Veer, these efforts unfolded in four distinct (but overlapping) phases: institutional development (1992-1997), policy research through key projects (1997 – 2002), capacity development through networks (2000 – 2005) and knowledge generation for policy influence through communities of practice (2005 to the present).

Findings from the case study suggest that IDRC's progression from an almost singular organizational focus on the Ministry towards a more multi-issue and multi-actor systems approach to knowledge generation is in keeping with the lessons that have emerged from an OECD-DAC study that reviewed institutional capacity development in environment.<sup>1</sup>

## **Building an inverted knowledge pyramid: From top to base**

Between 1992 and 1997, IDRC participated in a multilateral effort to build arrangements and linkages, helping define the structure, mandate, responsibilities, and create a work-plan for the new MoE (known in the beginning as the State Secretariat for Environment). Cambodia's environment ministry had little capacity to develop policy frameworks for environmental management. There was also uncertainty over which branches of government had actual control over specific environmental issues. It became clear, therefore, that fostering sustainable resource management practices locally would require significant institutional development at higher levels. For example, moving away from legislation by decree (which had been the norm) towards evidence-based policy-making would require building research capacity and fostering a culture of respect for field-based research within Cambodia's MoE.

A strategic element in this institutional development phase was the provision of a senior policy-advisor in the governmental/non-governmental consortium known as the Cambodian Environmental Management Program (CEMP)—an initiative that wound down prematurely after the withdrawal of a major donor in reaction to political turbulence.

Despite the uncertain political climate, substantial progress had been made on national-level work to create institutional and policy frameworks. IDRC turned its attention (from 1997 through 2002) to four field projects designed to encourage participatory resource management regimes in local communities. Engaging actors at all levels of government—local, provincial, and national—as well as a local university, these projects focused on issues like securing the rights of ethnic minorities to their land and resources, community-based fisheries and solutions to overfishing, and community forestry research. Operating under a MoE mandate, the projects worked with governmental and non-governmental actors, seeking both practical gains at the field level and continued research and technical capacity-building within the Ministry.

In the policy research project section of his report, Veer focuses on the capacity-building results of two emblematic efforts: the Participatory Management of Coastal Resources (PMCR) initiative and the Community Forest Research Project (CFRP). While Veer found that staff from both projects had differing levels of acceptance and understanding of participatory, community-based methods, both projects had significant success in developing and testing approaches to support and strengthen community-based natural resource management (CBNRM)

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<sup>1</sup> OECD-DAC *Donor Support for Institutional Capacity Development in Environment: Lessons Learned*. Evaluation and Effectiveness Report no. 3. Paris (2000).

Participatory research skills were developed through multiple means such as training courses, workshops, and local learning events. The deployment of foreign advisors as mentors and, in some cases, the opportunity for team leaders and other key employees to study overseas also had positive impacts. In fact, Veer says that partly because of efforts like these “it is clear that IDRC has contributed considerably in Cambodia to creating a significantly larger and higher quality pool of experts in sustainable development.”

Results emerging from the policy research projects suggested that policy making for ENRM could be better enhanced by building a resilient network of researchers from both inside and outside of the government. Between 2000 and 2005, a group of MoE staff and advisers joined other researchers to form the core of the CBNRM case study initiative, an action research strategy that documented ENRM innovations through ten case studies. The case study initiative was the backbone of a networking effort that communicated lessons emerging from field research projects through the Coastal Resources Research (CoRR) network and its successor, the regional LeaRN (Learning and Research Networking) initiative. One of the main results of these networks has been the creation of the independent CBNRM Learning Institute, which offers training programs, support for graduate students, and technical and policy assistance to government agencies.

## Looking ahead

Veer concludes that “the capacity developed by key MoE personnel involved in IDRC supported activities for about one decade, has contributed to their design of a new organizational arrangement to enable them (MoE) to assist a wider range of key actors to acquire capacity for participatory research and development.” The role of the Ministry of Environment has increasingly become that of strategic partner in developing the capacity of others. According to Veer, “the greater challenge for the MoE may be... the need for coordination or collaboration with the large number of ‘other related ministries with the direct mandate of supporting rational use of natural resources’ (World Bank, 2003).” For the immediate future, IDRC’s approach to nesting its support to the Ministry in a broader strategy of capacity development for multiple actors may continue to make sense.

**The International Development Research Centre (IDRC)** is a Canadian crown corporation, created to help developing countries find solutions to the social, economic, and natural resource problems they face. Support is directed to building indigenous research capacity. Because strengthening and mobilizing research capacity is a cornerstone of IDRC’s work, in 2005 the Evaluation Unit launched a strategic evaluation on capacity development focusing on the processes and results of IDRC support of its Southern partners. The evaluation design and studies can be found at: [www.idrc.ca/en/ev-70623-201-1-DO\\_TOPIC.html](http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-70623-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html)