



**Summary Report of
CSOs, Evidence and Policy Influence: A National Workshop
Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Inter Continental Hotel, 21-22 June 2005**

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in collaboration with MEDiCAM held a workshop on 'CSOs, Evidence and Policy Influence' in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on 21-22 June 2005. The two-day workshop was attended by representatives of CSOs, educational institutes and bilateral and multilateral donor agencies working in Cambodia.

Dr. Sin Somuny, Executive Director of MEDiCAM, facilitated the workshop with Mr. Ros Hoy. The workshop was presided over by H.E. Dr. Mam Bun Heng, Secretary of State, Ministry of Health, the Royal Government of Cambodia.

In his welcome remarks, Dr. Sin Somuny thanked all the participants who attended the workshop despite their busy schedules. He also thanked ODI for jointly organising the workshop with MEDiCAM, and he hoped that this would be an opportunity where both CSOs in Cambodia and ODI could learn from each other on their experiences of research and policy change. Mr. Naved Chowdhury gave a brief overview of the Research and Policy Development Programme (RAPID), emphasising the importance of research and research-based evidence in advocating for policy change. He also gave a snapshot of the Civil Society Partnership Programme (CSPP) and the lessons learnt from consultations held in different countries in Africa earlier in year. He highlighted that the major aim of the workshop in Cambodia is to share experiences on policy influence, find areas of collaboration between CSPP and CSOs, and present methods and tools for influencing policy in the participants' own areas of interest. CSPP intends to assist CSOs in better engage with government in policy making through the use of information gathered from its research. Details were also presented on principles to guide and ensure that the intended partnerships are ethical and participative.

H.E. Dr. Mam Bun Heng, on behalf of the Ministry of Health and the Royal Government of Cambodia, gave a welcome address. He stated that Cambodian Government has a good track record of partnerships with organisations, especially in health, and that this workshop could help form a more productive collaboration between civil society and government. He added that a prime example of this success is the partnership between the Government of Cambodia and CSOs in combating HIV/AIDS.

Next, Dr. Brett Ballard from Cambodian Development Resource Institute (CDRI) presented a case study on 'Evidence and Policy in Cambodia: Lessons Learnt, Opportunities and Constraints' in which two case studies dealing with participatory poverty assessment in the Tonlé Sap region were discussed. Dr. Ballard spoke of how big donors have the advantage over smaller CSOs in Cambodia. He mentioned that it is important for any organisation, such as CDRI, to develop credibility through undertaking quality research over a number of years. Dr. Ballard felt that over time, credible research has the potential to create good researchers. During discussions following the presentations, it was expressed that policy should be developed 'from the bottom up' and that the trend in Cambodia is to produce qualitative

rather than quantitative material, which policy makers often see as 'soft' and not representative of the situation on the ground.

Researchers can also influence donor policies, not just government ones. While asked about the influence of external donors on policy development in Cambodia (ODI had noticed in Africa it was quite obvious) the audience confirmed that external influence has huge impact over policy in Cambodia. Policies are sometimes developed by donors/government that local people are not aware of.

Dr. Sin Somuny presented a case study on MEDiCAM as an example of a Cambodian CSO that advocates for policy change. MEDiCAM was established in 1989 and is a membership organisation representing all NGOs active in Cambodia's health sector. Its main mandates are information sharing, advocacy, capacity building, and representing the collective voice of NGOs working on health issues.

MEDiCAM has been publishing a newsletter on health issues since 1996. Dr. Somuny spoke of 18 technical working groups (TWGs) on development issues that were established by the Royal Government of Cambodia. To further influence policy decisions, Dr. Somuny recommended that NGOs/CSOs work closely with the TWGs; MEDiCAM attends several of these TWGs. MEDiCAM also publishes an annual position paper on health issues in collaboration with its members and other NGOs. The paper is then presented to the government for consideration.

Challenges that MEDiCAM faces include: lack of quality of information; CSOs are sometimes not willing to work together; competition for funding; CSOs, donors and the government blaming each other for lack of trust between the stakeholders; and the fact that 'more money often equals a louder voice'.

In addition, Dr. Sin Somuny highlighted several lessons learned: empirical evidence is the best way to support policy changes; NGOs/CSOs need to work closely together; a well-documented consensus between CSOs is essential for making sure that the recommendations made are considered to be credible by the government; and risk can be reduced by CSOs not being too confrontational and not aligning with any political party.

Finally, during the plenary discussion on 'Successes, Constraints and Opportunities in Policy Making in Cambodia' the participants brainstormed on the general policy constraints they faced, what tools have been used for successfully dealing with them, and how policy makers should be approached. Issues brought up during the session included slow cash disbursement by the government, linking with trade unions/private sector for greater impact on policy and involving members of Cambodia's Parliament and Commune Councils in the discussions.

On Day 2 the participants were divided into three groups. Each group was asked to consider a Cambodian case they were personally familiar with, explain the approaches they used to influence policy and identify the factors that influenced those approaches. Topics chosen were: 1) Improved Health Service Delivery in Battambang; 2) Gender Mainstreaming in Cambodia; and 3) Amendment/Removal of Cambodia's Article 57 from Common Statute for Civil Servants in Cambodia.

Following this first session of group work, ODI gave an example on how the Context, Evidence, Links (CEL) framework was actually used to analyse the political context, evidence and links that contributed to the development of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP).

With the PRSP case study fresh in their minds, the three groups met again to analyse their previous case studies using the CEL framework. This yielded much clearer and more focused results for everyone involved.

The main lessons learned throughout the two days of discussions were:

- Involving the beneficiaries in understanding any problem and supporting its solution is crucial for developing a sense of ownership by all the stakeholders.
- CSOs should be able to access government data.
- Public awareness can be difficult when people are frightened or intimidated by local officials.
- CSOs should avoid alignment with any particular political party.
- Both formal and informal networks need to be identified – CSOs must work both 'inside and outside' the government to have sustained impact over policy.
- Utilise public forums, such as TWGs, whenever possible.
- It is necessary to be both confrontational and constructive.
- The more people/groups behind a topic or cause, the safer it will be for them to advocate for change. It is difficult to stand alone in Cambodia, especially in isolated, rural areas as personal safety can be at stake.
- Capacity building is needed for both government and CSO staff.
- Empower the community to participate in the policy making process. Local authorities such as Commune Councils can be very useful partners in this process.
- Links to the private sector can also be beneficial in influencing policy.

Lastly, participants were asked to make recommendations on how ODI can further support Cambodia's CSOs in influencing policy. Suggestions included:

- Providing training on research methodology;
- Working with CSO networks to improve advocacy and negotiation skills with policy makers;
- Funding for local CSOs;
- Developing capacity on policy analysis, advocacy, human resources and support institutional development;
- Organising study tours and exchange visits to foreign countries to examine other nations' successes in influencing government's policy;
- Sharing experience through website, e-mails;
- Providing technical and financial support for pilot policy initiatives, from research to advocacy;
- Strengthening existing advocacy networks.