

# **The Programmatic Approach: reflections from Cambodia**

**December 2007**

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## **Preface**

This paper tries to give an honest description of the development, the continuities and changes over time, and my evolving understandings of the programmatic approach as applied in the development of a Cambodia Democratization and Peace Building program.

If the history to date is to be taken as an indication this description is a momentary snap shot and more change is to be expected. A major lesson learned from the experience up to now is that the fuzzy mix of ICCO's agenda for change, adopting a programmatic approach and maximizing ownership of the programs by Southern partners, is a bit like the fuzzy particles in quantum mechanics. When one doesn't focus, all seems possible, but as soon as one chooses a focus, in casu program or ownership, it turns into a reality that seems to lack the aspect that one didn't focus on.

Each possibility for a focus comes with a strong tendency to dominate the field. To realize this has taken me a while and this paper is in that sense also a personal story. For very understandable reasons most NGO donors<sup>1</sup> adopting a programmatic approach end up with a narrowly focused program that is seen by its Southern implementers as owned by the donor. At this moment in time I cannot claim that this is unavoidable. But I do observe this to be the normal scenario, and that observation has become clearer over time as is described below<sup>2</sup>.

When I started, my understanding of what the Cambodia program development should focus on was not well developed beyond a strong intuition that only a process-oriented approach would have any chance of giving meaning to ICCO's claim to working in 'partnership' with Southern NGOs. This paper describes the evolution of that intuition into a more explicit argument for prioritizing ownership over (a certain understanding of what makes for a good) program. It may well be that in line with the quantum mechanics metaphor, choosing ownership as the focus will result in unacceptable<sup>3</sup> compromises regarding the coherence of the program that results from this process. Obviously I hope and expect that going down this road we will hit upon an escape route. But I don't know for sure. However, given the experiences to date with the mainstream alternative I believe trying something different is worth the risks.

Of the items on ICCO's agenda for innovation and change, it is co-responsibility that is by far the most ambitious goal. The program development process in Cambodia tries to live up to that ambition.

Colleagues at ICCO, especially Odile Ruijs, Herman Brouwer, and above all, Sjoerd Haagsma, have been very much part of my evolving understanding of what the programmatic approach, as applied in Cambodia, is about, but none of them is responsible for the description below. The purpose of this paper is to document (my understanding of) the process up to now, to feed the ICCO debate on the programmatic approach, to receive input from other voices, and to catch an interesting process in its empirical messy richness before it acquires its post hoc sanitized and streamlined official narrative that is bound to emerge when the outcome is going to be assessed.

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<sup>1</sup> I would know of none that did otherwise, but my knowledge is very limited. Any reader knowing of other donors making the choice to prioritize ownership over program is invited to share this with the author!

<sup>2</sup> Again, my knowledge is limited, so I am eager to learn of any example of a donor prioritizing the development of a narrowly focused program (starting with a broad partner portfolio) and being successful in the Southern partners taking ownership of that program.

<sup>3</sup> In terms of what the back donor expects

## **1. The context: ICCO agenda for innovation and change**

Like in other European countries, development aid by Dutch non-governmental organizations (NGO) is paid for by a mix of public and private funds. Until quite recently the bulk of public funds for NGO were channeled through the so-called MFS budget line for development cooperation<sup>4</sup> that was only accessible to a very limited number of organizations. Membership of this select group was based upon the organization's status as representing one of the traditional political 'communities' of the Dutch consociational democracy<sup>5</sup>. ICCO was founded in 1965 as the protestant representative for MFS. Some of the members of this group only funded part of their work through this program, the rest being covered by other fund-raising activities (church collections, public campaigns, etc.). However, ICCO has always been near totally dependant upon MFS money.

### **1.1 Competition for back-donor funding**

Over the last decade the MFS budget line has progressively been opened up for competition, culminating in it's latest call for four-year proposals (2007-2010) being open to all. On top of this the government also decided to limit its contribution to 75% of the total budget plan. This implied a pressing need for those responding to this call – especially those totally dependant upon MFS - to stand out amongst the crowd of other applicants and to be credible with respect to the objectives stated in the application<sup>6</sup>.

ICCO's response was two-pronged:

- It did not submit its own business plan but formed an alliance with 5 other (smaller) protestant development organizations and handed in an alliance plan;
- This plan commits ICCO to three major changes in the way it operates: a programmatic approach, co-responsibility of partners in the South for ICCO Alliance policy decisions, and a decentralized governance and operational structure.

All of these responses are rooted in earlier developments. Forming an Alliance – including a merger of the operational departments of ICCO and KerkinActie, the biggest of the partners – is in line with an ongoing process of closer collaboration/merger of protestant development organizations<sup>7</sup>. ICCO (and most of its partners) have traditionally been centralized organizations. However, there are already a couple of field office experiments ongoing so operational decentralization experience is being developed as we speak. Co-responsibility has been around as an intention for a long time, although the term itself only acquired prominence during development of the current business plan. And a programmatic approach has its predecessor in earlier choices regarding thematic foci for ICCO support.

### **1.2 The emergence of Co-responsibility and the programmatic approach as ICCO policy**

As changes of the operational organization can be considered instrumental rather than fundamental<sup>8</sup> this section only explores ICCO's history with co-responsibility and the programmatic approach.

The history of ICCO policy development reflects the changing (back-donor) environment. While the 1990ies only saw two general policy statements, Signs of Hope (December 1993) and (On) the road of justice (November 2000), the latter was followed up in 2002/2004 with a whole range of policy papers fleshing out the principles described in the general statement. And the two business plans (2003-2006: June 2002, and 2007-2010: April 2006) can be understood as general policy statements

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<sup>4</sup> 'Medefinancieringsprogramma voor Ontwikkelingsamenwerking', or co-financing program for development cooperation.

<sup>5</sup> A label coined by the political scientist Arend Lijphart for a system that aims for societal harmony through separation of 'communities', in Dutch jargon called 'pillars' (in the case of the Netherlands: Catholics, Protestants, Liberals, Socialists) at associational and (most of the) institutional levels (schools, trade unions, media, political parties, sports clubs, development organizations, etc. etc.) under an overarching umbrella of compromise and consensus at the level of the political elites of the respective communities (see Lijphart 1977). For a quick overview: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consociational\\_democracy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consociational_democracy)

<sup>6</sup> When explaining the rationale for its agenda for change ICCO is quite explicit about the increased competition for government funds being the major catalyst. Presentations during regional partner meetings openly emphasize this, e.g. during the Democratization and Peace Building Partner Consultation in Chiang Mai, 30 Oct – 2 Nov 2006.

<sup>7</sup> This process is concisely described in the Business plan, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> However this does not imply that they are not important; changing the 'hardware' of an organization is bound to have many consequences, not all of which are going to be intended. So, although intended to be instrumental, one can never be sure they do not turn out to be fundamental to what actually happens....

in their own right, especially the latest one. Competition and other outside pressure thus directly translated into heightened policy activity.

*Co-responsibility* is embedded in ICCO's partnership policy. An April 2003 policy paper and a May 2004 Code of conduct outline this policy emphasizing shared goals, mutual respect (for each other's autonomy), and transparency/accountability. The 2007-2010 business plan takes this "to the next level" with its commitment towards co-responsibility of the Alliance and its Southern partners for policy development. Also the programmatic approach is embedded within this evolving partnership by way of the intention to make the willingness of partners to work in coalitions with other civil society actors a criterion for the (bi-lateral) partnership with ICCO.<sup>9</sup>

The *programmatic approach* is rooted in the choice made in 2000<sup>10</sup> for three thematic foci: (1) sustainable economic development/aid and trade, (2) basic services, and (3) democratization and security. The 2003-2006 business plan operationalized these three themes - now labeled fair and sustainable economic development, (access to) basic services, and democratization and security – but on the ground, both at head quarters' level and in particular country (or where applicable regional) settings, 'programs' largely remained administrative constructions. E.g. the management information system measured 'program' indicators at the level of individual partner organizations (% of activities within particular thematic foci, etc.). ICCO is not alone in taking a programmatic approach on board and is certainly not an early adopter. By the time the current business plan 2007-2010 was being developed much more substantive versions of the programmatic approach were being implemented by some other NGO donors. The commitments made in the current business plan was thus to start living up to the rhetoric and develop 'real' programs.

### **1.3 The tension between NGO sector programmatic approaches and local ownership**

ICCO does not have institutionalized experience with the programmatic approach. As was thus to be expected the commitment made in the 2007 – 2010 business plan triggered lively internal debates about what this is all about. "Programmatic approach" is a container term covering many different understandings. Which of these various understanding did the alliance commit to?

As a context to my reflections on this I borrow some background from a report on the programmatic approach by Ecumenical Consortium for Central Asia (ECCA) advisor Dirk Frans<sup>11</sup>.

#### **Box 1: The history of the programmatic approach**

"In the '90s the dissatisfaction with the impact of the project approach led to discussions in government, non-government and academic circles about more effective modes of development assistance. Out of these deliberations the "programmatic approach" (PBA) came up as the most widely accepted direction to go. In generic terms this approach emphasize a comprehensive approach in a given sector or thematic area of intervention, coordinated planning and implementation involving a variety of relevant actors and a strong emphasis on local ownership". (p.2)

Frans' description is quite explicit about the initial impetus for a more comprehensive and coordinated approach, embedded in the local context, coming from the world of government-to-government development cooperation: He cites a 2003 CIDA report that identifies a 1996 OECD-DAC publication as 'seminal'.

His description also explicitly takes the CIDA definition representing the ideal type against which NGO sector versions can be benchmarked (see box 2). Core to the argument developed below regarding the choices made for the programmatic approach in Cambodia is that the very first attribute of the ideal type is "leadership", read as including "ownership", by the host country or organization. In various later sections of the report local ownership is identified as crucial.

<sup>9</sup> ICCO Alliance (April 2006), p.23

<sup>10</sup> ICCO (November 2000)

<sup>11</sup> Frans (May 2007)

### **Box 2: The ideal typical programmatic approach<sup>12</sup>**

"Globally CIDA is acknowledged as one of the organizations that has developed the most comprehensive theoretical understanding of the PBA. CIDA defines a program as "*an integrated set of activities designed to achieve a related set of outcomes in a relatively comprehensive way. A PBA is a way of engaging in development cooperation based on the principle of coordinated support for a locally owned program of development. The approach includes four key elements:*

- **Leadership by the host country or organization.** (emphasis RH)
- *A single program and budget framework.*
- *Donor coordination and harmonization of procedures.*
- *Efforts to increase the use of local procedures over time with regard to program design and implementation, financial management, and monitoring and evaluation."* (CIDA, 2003, 2)

The varieties of programmatic approaches applied in the NGO sector are described in box 3. It is obvious which of the varieties is relevant for Cambodia: the single NGO donor moving from a project approach to a programmatic approach by bringing together a number of the partners it supports in a "program'.

### **Box 3: Varieties of programmatic work in the NGO sector<sup>13</sup>**

"The closest NGO equivalent of large international donors, relating to a single government in a particular country, is when there is a large local NGO supported by a number of different donors. This is for instance the case in Bangladesh where the education programme of an NGO like BRAC fits this category. In this case the policy decisions and strategies are basically developed and owned by that NGO (often in close contact with the local government). In practice the donors usually have some input in developing the policies and strategies, but otherwise this is form of the programmatic approach comes closest to the ideal of local ownership. World-wide there are few examples of this kind of programmatic work in the NGO sector.

Much more widespread is the single NGO donor moving from a project approach to a programmatic approach by bringing together a number of the partners it supports in a "programme". In other words, the donor seeks to improve the impact of its activities in a particular country by linking and synchronizing them. The expectation is that this will result in mutual learning, synergy and improved sustainability. In this approach, which is close to portfolio management, the element of local ownership is usually less important.

A third variety of the programmatic approach in the NGO sector is where several donors and several local actors are involved. This arrangement is close to a network arrangement with a variety of relationships between the organizations involved. In this situation it may be difficult to identify programmatic aims and objectives, achievements (or lack there of) and attribute successes and failures to specific actors. Furthermore there is a risk that the coordinated approach of the donors strengthens their hands in relation to that of local actors. Managing such complex arrangements can take up much resources. ECCA is an example of this kind of programmatic approach".

Interestingly, Frans observes that "in this approach, which is close to portfolio management, *the element of local ownership is usually less important*". What does this exactly mean, that in the variety of programmatic approach that we are actually interested in the core characteristic of local ownership "is usually less important"? I believe that the inescapable conclusion is that it means that *in this variety* (as well as in the third – that he calls a 'network arrangement') ownership is with the donor. Going back to the CIDA definition (see box 2): the ideal type assumes leadership by the host country or organization. The organization in this case happens to be the donor. The report clearly struggles with this conclusion, acknowledging it as a reality but at the same time not wanting to accept it. The problem with accepting is that it goes against the grain of what the programmatic approach stands for in his understanding: "The single most characteristic element of a PBA is that it is mainly driven by the recipient, not the donor"<sup>14</sup>. Box 4 sums up this struggle.

<sup>12</sup> Frans (May 2007), p.5

<sup>13</sup> Frans (May 2007), p.13

<sup>14</sup> Frans (May 2007), p.16

**Box 4: Stress local ownership<sup>15</sup>**

Local ownership is at the core of the PBA. While all donor agencies support the desirability of local ownership, reality is that donors have their own constituency, agreed thematic and geographical focus areas and ideas about what current best practices are. Therefore there often is a tension between the good intentions and reality on the ground. Local ownership in a PBA related to a national government is relatively straightforward because there is a single local actor to relate to; the national government. The government decides on policies and then also owns them. In the non-governmental sector there usually are a number of different actors and clusters of actors. It is not always clear who they key local actors are and even if that is clear, they may not agree on a common policy and/or approach. Furthermore the current arrangements in ECCA are such that there is one lead agency from the donor side per theme. In that situation it might be difficult for the agency to leave local actors the full freedom to develop and own the programme. Keeping these realities in mind, lead agencies will have to ensure that there are ample opportunities in the process for local actors to define their own policies, develop the programme according to their understanding and in the process own the programme. [emphasis in the original]

What are we to make of this? Going back to the two core elements of the CIDA definition:

- An integrated set of activities designed to achieve a related set of outcomes in a relatively comprehensive way;
- Support for a locally owned program of development.

The conclusion I draw is that these are only fully compatible (in theory) within a government-to-government relationship or within the NGO variety of a large local NGO supported by a number of different donors. In the other NGO sector varieties, thus also in the one at stake for the programmatic approach to ICCO support in Cambodia, there is an inherent tension. When discussing principles and parameters for success at various stages of a programmatic approach Frans describes "difficulties" regarding local ownership of policy development: "With some of the more mature and capable partners, donor agencies moved towards a two-way process in which policies were developed together with the partners. Nevertheless, many local partners are used to donors deciding on policy issues and many finding it difficult under a PBA to take ownership of policy and strategy decisions"<sup>16</sup>. And when explicitly discussing ownership of the program his conclusions become quite blunt: "To state the obvious, the areas of intervention chosen by member agencies of ECCA are to a large extent determined by their own, Northern context....As such donors should not give the impression that their main foci are determined by communities in the South; they are not... Donor agencies and civil society actors can only work together as and when there is sufficient overlap between their areas of interest and within those, ways and means of involvement"<sup>17</sup>.

**1.4 What makes for a good program?**

One element still missing in the argument for an inherent tension between 'program' and 'ownership' is that the term 'program' in the development business has a dominant interpretation. And it is this particular understanding of what makes for a good program that is causing the inherent tension. The dominant understanding is of an integrated set of activities designed to achieve a related set of outcomes contributing to a common goal and is customarily described in logical framework format. Log frames are great analytic tools but they do make discursive assumptions that look best with a tight focus. The prototypical log frame describes a project, not a program<sup>18</sup>. The prototype operates as an ideal-type that implies that 'comprehensiveness' of a log frame is an important attribute of its 'quality'. Problem not really solved if only part of the causes are addressed, isn't it? There is nothing 'wrong' with this implication, it is the inherent 'logic' of the instrument.

When this logic started being applied to more complex issues that required 'program' coordination between the projects of many departments and/or organizations its most 'natural' application turned out to be a whole policy sector in a country supported by government-to-government aid, the so-called sector-wide approaches (SWAP). Within the NGO sector the natural applications were within single larger NGOs running either sector programs (e.g. the example of BRAC in box 3) or

<sup>15</sup> Frans (May 2007), p.21-22

<sup>16</sup> Frans (May 2007), p.16

<sup>17</sup> Frans (May 2007), p.17

<sup>18</sup> The log frame was developed as an instrument in the project cycle management approach

geographically targeted integrated development programs or took the form of shared large-budget 'projects' implemented by a consortium of NGOs, funded by e.g. the EC.

This kind of comprehensiveness is very difficult to achieve if the one doesn't start from the top (problem/objective) and works back/down towards activities. Obviously, this in-built top-down requirement in itself does not preclude ownership. But it does result in conditions that need to be in place before ownership can be expected. As Frans states with respect to SWAPs: "In the case of global donors this means that there must be a country policy in place before donor agencies will even consider applying a PBA".<sup>19</sup> (Competent) governments and professional organizations are able to develop comprehensive sector or regional plans (and then realistically be expected to own them). And professional organizations are also able to both design and implement in a coordinated way shared projects consisting of an integrated set of sub-projects as long as the top-level objective is reasonably specific and close to their core mandate<sup>20</sup>.

Before moving on to what the consequences are of this in-built top-down requirement on program development of NGO donor programs one last remark about why such donors are affected by this ideal-type. For most donors going for a more programmatic approach is triggered by the same increased competition for funding that was the catalyst for ICCO. Programs thus have to satisfy two audiences. They have to survive internal professional debates about their added value in terms of impact on the ground, and they have to convince the back donor(s) and public opinion. For the latter audience, the more straightforward a program narrative, the better. Anything needing explanation to convince is a minus. And when, as is the case, your (back donor) audience has a particular understanding of what makes for a good program, better conform.

Compared to other donors ICCO is a late-comer to the programmatic approach. In Frans' words: "It may be concluded that ICCO is committed to a PBA and that the organization is still working out what this means in practice in its various programmes"<sup>21</sup>. However, it seems clear that whatever the institutionalization of the programmatic approach is going to look like, the dominant understanding of what makes for a good program is bound to be quite mainstream.

#### **Box 5: ICCO's understanding of what makes for a good program**

From the start, ICCO's internal discussions about programming were inspired by the above described rationale of programs as complex versions of projects, framed by a similar logic. Discussions between champions and doubters focus(ed) on the assumed added value of programs, the feasibility of the required collaboration between NGOs, the required focus and the reality of current partner portfolio's etc., it did not challenge the mainstream definition of what makes for a good program. The most obvious indicator of this underlying shared understanding amongst all discussants is that parallel to the admittedly messy but certainly intensive and honestly open forum provided for discussion ICCO management initiated a process of defining program formats and developing a new management information system incorporating the new program logic along 'mainstream understanding' lines.

Nevertheless, there are definite advantages of not being an early adopter. Although the general mainstream seems to (have) become ICCO's mainstream too, the internal voices advocating for allowing context specific deviations, room for flexibility and experimentation are vocal and for the time being not subdued but given the opportunity to proof their validity.

#### **1.5 Ways to deal with the tension between program integration and ownership**

We Dutch are good at reconciling differences through compromise. Admired and criticized for our creative "gedoog" solutions<sup>22</sup> we're not easily fazed by inconsistency. Thus the business plan confidently commits itself to both (more) local ownership and real programs, without, however,

<sup>19</sup> Frans (May 2007), p.16

<sup>20</sup> Obviously shared projects sometimes require expertise/input for which this is not true, but usually that kind of input/expertise would then be outsourced. In EC-speak this input would not be delivered by a contract partner (who is expected to own the project) but a sub-contractor.

<sup>21</sup> Frans (May 2007), p.7

<sup>22</sup> The straightforward translation of "gedogen" is "to tolerate", but its connotations are difficult to translate other than through giving examples of policies that are inconsistent in principle but pragmatically effective, e.g. re drugs, and euthanasia.



providing much guidance on how to accomplish both at the same time, beyond some general statements about a participatory approach to programming.

However, I believe it is wise to recognize that in many or even most circumstances the current dominant understanding of what makes for a nicely “integrated set of activities designed to achieve a related set of outcomes in a relatively comprehensive way” makes for different program development process and outcome than when local ownership is given primacy. Experience to date with programmatic approaches from a variety of other NGO donors has taught me that:

- All do in one way or the other claim following a participatory approach in program development;
- And all claim that this approach results in some measure of local ownership;
- But the actual program development process is primarily determined by the particular understanding of what makes for a good program described in 1.4, and *this conflicts with ownership*.

Again, it is instructive to take Dirk Frans’ report as a starting point: he analyzes where the various ECCA agencies are on the road toward a programmatic approach. DanChurchAid (DCA) is identified as representing “the ‘state of the art’ when it comes to applying the PBA”.<sup>23</sup> It is therefore instructive to use the DCA experience with program development and as the APRODEV donors present in Cambodia have devoted two of their half yearly meetings to programming issues<sup>24</sup> there is some hands-on experience to share.

With DCA programming is institutionalized<sup>25</sup>, which means that there are programming procedures, outlined in manuals, and a pretty clear idea what makes for a good program, an idea that is in line with the earlier described ideal-type. Like ICCO, DCA has corporate themes and country-level programs are incarnations of these themes. DCA’s “Democratic Space” can be seen as the equivalent of ICCO’s “Democratization and Peace Building” theme. In Cambodia, DCA is in its second programming cycle and the changes between the first and second cycle programs show what is considered important and what this implies for the programming process. The first (2004 – 2006) incarnation of the program had the generic theme title “Democratic Space”, and was quite broad. The assessment of the first cycle program resulted in the decision that the second cycle version should be *much more* focused. Part of the rationale for more focus had to do with what it takes for NGO partners implementing the program to be able and interested to make some tangible contribution to fleshing out the program, to share enough ground to experience partner meetings as delivering something of benefit, and to have enough common interests to allow for some cross-cutting program level capacity building, research and other program-level added value activities. Part of the rationale was that the Cambodia program just could not get anywhere near the ideal-type without being much more focused. So the second version narrowed down to a Gender Based Violence program. At the moment DCA is developing a third program<sup>26</sup> in Cambodia on HIV/Aids. Based on a consultant report, this theme has been focused on prevention activities, targeting youth in four provinces.

DCA’s decision for the need to focus concurs with an earlier quoted conclusion of Frans: “Donor agencies and civil society actors can only work together as and when there is sufficient overlap between their areas of interest and within those, ways and means of involvement”<sup>27</sup>. What the DCA example teaches is what “sufficient overlap between their areas of interest and within those, ways and means of involvement” means *in practice*. With these things, what matters are the details, and one lesson to be learned from this practical example is that the tendency towards “more focus” pushes programs towards *pretty specific foci*. And that the possibilities for local partners to participate in the programming process only begin *after the donor has set determined this focus*. With the outline

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<sup>23</sup> Frans (May 2007), p.6

<sup>24</sup> For the history of these meetings: see Henke (February 2007) Memo APRODEV Cambodia collaboration. Programming was on the agenda on 16 March 2007 and 8 November 2007

<sup>25</sup> As opposed to ICCO of which Frans (May 2007) says: “In summary it may be concluded that ICCO is committed to a PBA and that the organization is still working out what this means in practice in its various programmes”. (p.7)

<sup>26</sup> From ARODEV collaboration perspective a very interesting case because the program is going to be a shared Christian Aid (CA)/DCA entity, managed by a Phnom Penh based DCA/CA office, with a field representative mandated from both headquarters, and administered using a single financial and reporting system.

<sup>27</sup> Frans (May 2007), p.17

of the program a given, those invited to flesh it out as prospective partners can be expected to share sufficient interest in this area of work, be knowledgeable and able to actively contribute towards designing a 'good' log-frame. The DCA experience shows that this is indeed the case. The programming workshop does result in lively and informed discussions and good ideas for activities needed, workable indicators, etc. However, several obstacles to ownership of the program, or even components of the program by the Cambodian NGOs, remain insurmountable.

Recently DCA evaluated its program development experiences over the last couple of years agency wide (their process started in 2000/2001 with the first program approved in 2003)<sup>28</sup>. As the summary in box 6 shows, this evaluation confirms my reading of the inherent tension between ownership and programming as conventionally understood.

**Box 6: DCA experiences with program development over the last 3-4 years<sup>29</sup>**

The positive changes of a programmatic approach over a project approach:

- Better understanding of context
- More strategic interventions: more focused, more explicit, more consistent
- *Increased partner involvement*
- Clearer identity and role for DCA
- More linkages between partners ("in some cases joint initiatives are taken")
- Program focus using increases DCA ability to facilitate CB
- Increased dialogue between human rights and development NGOs
- Strengthened country-based advocacy is incipient
- DCA staff recruitment can be more strategic
- Conclusions regarding improved impact are not yet possible

However:

- The programmatic approach requires *more resources and time* than a project approach
- It took DCA *6 years* to develop a *relatively* clear program concept, more or less shared by all
- Context analysis tends to take way to much time. Make strategic decisions early on and take it from there
- Program monitoring is only very slowly taking off
- *The envisioned role of partners causes problems: On the one hand, the programmes are DCA's inventions in the first place; on the other, the expectation that partners should develop 'ownership of the programmes is explicit. What that means in practice...is not clear, not even in principle...The partnership approach does not override the programme approach...it is important that DCA is prepared to make its own decisions when needed.*

Obviously, these kind of policy texts tend to be somewhat multi-interpretable. More involvement but ownership a problem....However, the Cambodia country representative<sup>30</sup> is quite explicit in his reading of these experiences: the DCA approach to programming has shown to be effective regarding several of its objectives but *not* regarding ownership of/co-responsibility for the programs.

The first obstacle is that this way of programming, starting with a specific objective, inviting only those who are expected to be able to contribute outcomes that further that objective, tends to interact with those invited participating as individual organizations. Discussions are productive because those invited, implement activities that are directly relevant and what happens in the programming workshop is that organizations offer their suggestions for what they individually can contribute to one or more of the envisioned outcomes, i.e. place themselves in one or more boxes of the log frame. The quality of the program is very much of a conceptual nature, it is not grounded in any existing collaboration between partner organizations, and although the fleshing out of the program outline is indeed done in a very participatory manner, the underlying analysis is not that of the partners themselves. To the extent that relevant activities are not yet being implemented, possible implementers are approached and gauged for their interest to develop appropriate activities. DCA is

<sup>28</sup> By May 2007 some 20 programs have been planned and are being implemented; another 5 in the pipeline; the second generation of programs are being implemented as the first one expire.

<sup>29</sup> This is a purposive summary of PDU/Oleb (4 June 2007)

<sup>30</sup> Carsten Trier Høj, personal communication

quite rigorous in following the logic of its approach to its obvious logical end. No core funding is provided. Partner contracts specify what the organization is being funded for, which is the specific activities it contributes to the DCA program. And the program is very explicitly presented as a DCA program, and decision-making regarding all kinds of changes in the draft that is produced – by a consultant or DCA staff – on the basis of the programming workshop, is up to its head quarters, and are not discussed with partners until after the program is finalized.

The second, more general obstacle to ownership is that, unlike the ideal-typical cases of a host country or organization able to comprehensively service an integrated package of needs of a sector or a geographic area, any DCA-like program, even with a rather specific focus, is going to remain one program among others addressing these issues. Its partner organizations are part of/participate in programs or components of programs of others (NGO donors, bi-laterals, etc.) on similar issues. None of these programs are there own. Reiterating the observation of Frans' report that "many local partners are used to donors deciding on policy issues and many finding it difficult under a PBA to take ownership of policy and strategy decisions", it is fair to say that donors overwhelmingly do take decisions on policy issues and one should expect lack of ownership of donor programs rather than wonder why it is so evident.

It is clear ICCO has recognized the reality of these obstacles from the start. Internal documents summarizing discussions about pros and cons, opportunities and risks, of a programmatic approach always mention the tendency of programs to become top-down designed donor creations, which "in the worst case scenario reduce partners into sub-contractors of a donor Terms of reference" as one such document described it.<sup>31</sup> This recognition is then invariably dealt with by stating that the principle of co-responsibility safe-guards against this tendency dominating the process. Going for co-responsibility is seen as taking a bit more time, and possibly resulting in some compromise regarding the program focus. However, all based on the underlying assumption of the basic compatibility of the mainstream understanding of what makes for a good program and ownership of a program. It is this assumption that I am questioning here<sup>32</sup>. The inherent tension between program and ownership is real and 'program' concerns will overrule ownership concerns *unless one explicitly prioritizes ownership* and takes the process from there. A bit more time and accepting a bit less focus is not going to be sufficient. One needs to be clear about one's priorities if one claims interest in both a 'good' program in terms of the dominant understanding of what makes for program quality and ownership because without a conscious decision 'program' will take priority.'

As is described in the following section, for Cambodia ICCO made such a conscious decision to prioritize ownership over a narrowly focused top-down program conceptualization.

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<sup>31</sup> Brouwer (2007)

<sup>32</sup> The point I want to make here is thus *not* that the mainstream way of programming is flawed!

## **2. Program development in Cambodia: learning from the process**

As described above, ICCO started using programmatic approach jargon in its previous business plan (2003-2006). The first step for programming in Cambodia was an ICCO decision for Democratization and Peace Building as the focal theme<sup>33</sup>. This decision was formally made mid-2004 upon advice from the Cambodia desk officers (funding and personnel placement). Desk officer country visit reports constitute the next bits of input (starting with a spring 2004<sup>34</sup>, continued with spring 2005<sup>35</sup>).

### **2.1 Identification mission and in-country presence**

Autumn 2005 two in-country external consultants were hired for an identification mission, including a situation analysis and suggestions for program focus and program development<sup>36</sup>.

The interim report identified three issues for decision-making by ICCO in order for the consultant to be able to formulate suggestions. One of these was about establishing an in-country presence and the relationship between what kind of programming process was considered feasible with and without such presence. ICCO decided for in-country presence and a programming process prioritizing ownership. Phrasing this decision in these terms is admittedly a hindsight interpretation. It would be unfair to claim that the analysis described in this report was already available in the interim consultancy report. However, the report was explicit in stating that emphasizing 'partnership' would imply an in-country presence in order for partner voices to be of real influence (see annex 11 of the report). The main consultant (myself) was subsequently hired to become ICCO's in-country program coordinator.

Upon explicit request of ICCO, the final mission report included a log-frame suggestion for the Cambodia program with an overall goal, five strategic purposes and under each purpose a set of specific objectives. I was explicitly hesitant to comply – but ultimately did comply because his counterpart reasoned that the report would be a hard 'sell' within ICCO if it did not deliver upon what was expected of such a context analysis. The closer the program 'intake document' was to a 'real' program description, the better it would be understood.

The ensuing program development experience and the reflections on this experience can be interpreted as an ongoing process of conceptual clarification as well as practice learning of what it means to prioritize 'ownership' over 'program'.

The basic conclusions of the program identification mission were taken on board by ICCO in January/February 2006 and shared with partners during a partner meeting on 5 April 2006. This was the first time ever partner consultation in Cambodia. This meeting is best described as ICCO briefing partners and raising awareness of imminent changes and asking for feedback. ICCO conceptualized this meeting as the start of a one year process that would result in a program mid-2007. The assessment of this meeting as described in the travel report of ICCO HQ staff involved was positive, but included the observation of a fair amount of worry and a lot of difficulty amongst participants to really understand all that was presented, mainly because of a lack of understanding of what a programmatic approach is about<sup>37</sup>.

In hindsight it is clear that the presentation of ICCO intentions was very similar to the way other donors started their programming process, prioritizing the 'quality' of the program outcome rather than the ownership of the program. Process is emphasized but including a "draft outline" of program objectives was an implicit message that content was to be decided by ICCO. The future program coordinator (myself) participated as a consultant during the workshop, presenting the context analysis. The ICCO intentions, the tentative program log frame objectives, were presented by ICCO staff.

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<sup>33</sup> The ICCO 2003-2006 business plan did not yet contain an indication of a more exclusive focus on the Democratization theme for Cambodia (if any it contained a focus on Access to basic Services). A mid term Review of this plan in 2004 resulted in a decision to concentrate on one focal theme with possibly one supporting theme per country. The decision for Democratization and Peace Building – a 2003 reformulation of the original theme label – as the focal theme for Cambodia (and Access to basic Services as the supporting theme) is formally described in the yearly plan for 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Brouwer (2004)

<sup>35</sup> Brouwer (2005)

<sup>36</sup> Chhim & Henke (November 2005)

<sup>37</sup> See Ruijs et al. (2006)

### **Box 7: ICCO Intentions as presented during partner meeting April 2006**

#### **What does this mean for partners in Cambodia?**

- ICCO will continue to work with Civil Society Organisations in Cambodia
- Stronger focus on the theme of Democratisation, Human Rights, Peace Building
- A need for programmatic approach: collaboration for joint results.
- ICCO will consult with partners on how 'co-responsibility' can work out in Cambodia

#### **Programme Development: a draft outline**

*Overall goal:* A Cambodia where there is social justice and equitable participation of vulnerable citizens in the conduct of public affairs.

##### *Objectives:*

- Improved respect for, awareness of and ability to demand social justice
- Increased ability of vulnerable Cambodians to influence decisions affecting their lives through collective action
- Increased political influence of national level rights' advocates
- More policy and practice of ICCO and like-minded NGO donors and their partners is evidence-based
- Better donor coordination

#### **Programme Management**

- Start in September 2006 with a 12-month start-up phase. Use a process approach to further define this programme with ICCO partners and other stakeholders. Validate programme focus and roles.
- Recruit a D&P Programme Manager to facilitate this process. This is not an ICCO field office or representative, but a thematic specialist who can invest in network formation, knowledge management, and donor coordination.
- Grant management and monitoring will remain a HQ function. However, this D&P Programme Manager will have limited delegated funds for innovation and research.

*From: Power point partner consultation 5 April 2006*

I was hired as program coordinator and started setting up office in August 2006.

### **2.2 First programming workshop**

As I had advocated for making ICCO's commitment to partnership a primary consideration in the programming process, it was evident to me that partnership implied that the 'draft' program objectives would have to go out of the window. I set my hopes on another preparatory instrument often used in the first phase of program development: partner mapping. Partnership in my understanding required staying as close as possible to what partners currently do, are interested in, and 'network' around. A second reason for doing a partner mapping was that a program collectively owned by its NGO implementers can only be about NGOs collaborating with each other. Although there is plenty of NGO 'networking' evident in Cambodia, *structural* collaboration is rare, problematic, and described by many in the Cambodian NGO world themselves as one of their major weaknesses. It is widely seen as both expressing the traditional lack of strong, i.e. formal and enduring intermediary institutions between households and the state as loci for taking collective action and the very low trust character of Cambodian society<sup>38</sup>. A mapping exercise was seen as a possibility to identify and explore existing relationships amongst current partners and between partners and other NGOs that go beyond 'networking'. This reflected my understanding at that stage in time that the rationale underlying this program development process was to take the existing partnerships as a starting point (as opposed to formulating objectives, assessing existing partners in terms of their "fit", and only continuing with those whose organizational objectives are directly in line with the program objectives chosen by ICCO-Kerkinactie).

A follow up to the April partnership meeting was organized with the intention to explore, as open-ended as possible and with all current partners, their interests in issues around which collaboration might be possible. Partners were briefed about ICCO developments since April 2006, initial results of the mapping were presented, some additional existing relationships and interests explored, and they were asked what they felt needed to be done next. The process for the workshop was designed in

<sup>38</sup> For one recent summary description of these and some related characteristics of Cambodian society, see Henke (2007)

collaboration with ICCO partner VBNK, a management training institute contracted by ICCO for a long-term capacity building program custom tailored to individual ICCO partners. The VBNK facilitators were familiar with most partners because of that ongoing capacity building program. So facilitation was localized but the program coordinator<sup>39</sup> and the donor perspective were still very prominent. As box 8 shows there was an explicit effort to involve participants in an open discussion on possible program objectives.

**Box 8: ICCO Intentions as presented during partner meeting November 2006**

What aspects of the program are a given?

- Knowledge management
- Networking & collaboration
- Donor coordination

What aspects have to be developed?

- *Program objectives regarding the "issues" of democratization and peace building*
- Bring all aspects of the program to life

Further program development

- Big picture
  - Suggested target: June 2007 draft
  - What consultation is necessary and sufficient?
  - Planning
- Follow-up on the opportunities
  - Who takes the lead?
  - First action plan

*From: Power points partner consultation 25 November 2006*

However, the partners made it explicitly clear that even those who have been part of programming processes of other NGO donors are not used to a really open process. Those that are familiar with donor programming processes described their participation as "limited" to discussing how their organization could contribute to a very specific given objective, specific activities, indicators that they consider appropriate, assumptions that need to be fulfilled, etc. Many expressed their discomfort by requesting ICCO to please provide training on what *ICCO means* with democratization and peace building. The meeting also confirmed the difficulties many partners have with understanding what the meaning of program objectives could be beyond the current activities of their own NGO. When the question on the table is something like "how does what you do now contribute to specific given objective X" – objective X provided by the NGO donor – this problem may remain hidden. The donor provides the program level analytic framework. But when partners are invited to co-create that framework this unfamiliarity with strategic thinking beyond the own organization cannot but reveal itself.

In response to this state of affairs, I committed<sup>40</sup> to:

- Visit partner organizations individually to explain in more detail what the programming is all about.
- Use the partner information collected before and during the meeting to propose some smaller groupings of partners that have or could have a shared agenda to continue the discussion about program level objectives at a less strategic level, closer to current organizational interest.

The specific lesson learned from this meeting was that co-responsibility/ownership was to remain a distant ideal if we wouldn't be able to identify a level or forum for the discussion about shared objectives that made sense to our partners. But the more important and much more basic lesson learned was that we were trying something really new. ICCO may not be an early adopter of the

<sup>39</sup> Originally the Cambodia desk officer was scheduled to participate but this did not materialize because of her illness.

<sup>40</sup> See Henke (December 2006)

programmatic approach but it certainly seems an early adopter of prioritizing ownership/co-responsibility.

### 2.3 Second programming workshop

Spring was spent on completing the mapping exercise<sup>41</sup> and reach consensus with the Cambodia team at headquarters about a general outline of the program, based on the information gathered. The mapping exercise confirmed that the choice for democratization and peace building as the dominant theme for Cambodia reflected the current partner portfolio (choice for any of the other two themes would have meant that less of the current partners would have 'fit').

The Mapping did identify 'natural' clusters of NGOs – based upon their stated organizational objectives. There were some important additional lessons learned from the exercise.

The first was that *only* when organizational objectives were taken as indicating a 'relationship' did anything close to a coherent picture<sup>42</sup> of clusters emerge. Explicit questions about issues on which NGOs thought collaboration was necessary and issues for shared campaigns with other NGOs did not result in such a picture. The least this shows is that for this group of NGOs there is not much overlap between their individual 'core business' (as represented by their stated organizational objectives) and their analysis of what they consider important issues for Cambodia's development. And it is reasonable to assume that this disconnect between organization-level thinking and thinking about the broader context is a problem for most Cambodian NGOs.

Another lesson was that for questions on collaboration, trust, and other 'relationship' issues to have validity, the choice of meaningful partnerships should be left to the NGOs themselves. The most telling example was the question regarding intensive collaboration with other NGOs which was asked once in general, and once (during the partner meeting) with respect to other ICCO partners. The results differed considerably and the most plausible explanation was that what is seen as relatively "intensive" within a specific group of NGOs can be quite insignificant in light of one's "really" intensive relations with NGOs outside this group. This finding underlined that when one takes existing relationships of partner NGOs as one's basis for program development, this invariably implies going beyond the existing group of partners<sup>43</sup>.

The results of the mapping and the lessons learned from the partner meeting were the basis for intensive face-to-face discussions within the 'Cambodia team' during a field visit of headquarter based members<sup>44</sup> of the team to Cambodia. Reaching consensus on program outline and next steps was a necessary condition for moving ahead for two practical reasons. The first being that the mandate for funding decisions was not delegated to the program coordinator position in Cambodia but remained with my headquarter colleague. Apart from other practical reasons for and implications of this arrangement of responsibilities, this guaranteed that program development could only be team work. The second was that the non-mainstream direction for the Cambodia programming process that I advocated for would have to be defended, championed as you will, by the headquarter team members. The clearest indication for this need was that the main management directive that my colleagues brought from headquarters was the necessity to make choices and *focus*.

Box 8 describes the consensus reached and summarized in the final mapping report<sup>45</sup>. The consensus included a program outline that conceptualized the contribution of the various NGO approaches and thematic areas that were part of the existing ICCO Democratization and Peace Building support. We called the various approaches/thematic groups in this program outline *clusters*, and assumed them to be reasonable starting points for identifying (potential) natural coalitions. During the weeks following the visit meetings with these clusters were organized. These meetings were prepared for in

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<sup>41</sup> See Henke, R & Hong, H. (March 2007)

<sup>42</sup> This is to be taken literally: use of network analysis software resulted in a visual representation of the relationships between NGOs in terms of their shared objectives. See annex 1

<sup>43</sup> It also has serious methodological implications for evaluating the added value of programmatic collaboration, but this is not the place to elaborate on this

<sup>44</sup> Consisting of the departing (Odile Ruijs) and the incoming (Sjoerd Haagsma) Democratization and Peace Building (D & P) Cambodia portfolio managers and the person formerly in charge of personnel deployments in Cambodia (Herman Brouwer), whose new position was policy advisor to the D & P Department.

<sup>45</sup> Henke & Hong (March 2007), p.39-40. Also described in the travel report of Ruijs, Brouwer, and Haagsma (March 2007)

collaboration with a local facilitator, Meas Nee, who also facilitated the resulting two program development workshops (15 – 16 June 2007), one for the thematic area of Justice and the other for the thematic area of Peace<sup>46</sup>. The invitees for these workshops consisted of a sub-set of current ICCO partners *and some other organizations that current partners had identified as their natural allies and friends*. The underlying rationale being that (natural) coalitions have memberships that are not limited to NGOs which receive support from ICCO.

**Box 9: The program outline as Envisioned spring 2007**

Above and beyond the theme as the most appropriate choice of the three available “corporate” options, this mapping also confirms that many core ingredients of the identification mission situation analysis can be taken on board when developing the actual program on the basis of (but not limited to) existing partnerships.

The situation analysis resulted in “a basic programmatic conclusion that ...in order to enhance the responsiveness of the state to the needs of the poor, it’s necessary to focus attention on demand-side approaches and on how best to support the underlying social and non-governmental structures which underpin the Cambodian (and any other) state”<sup>47</sup>.

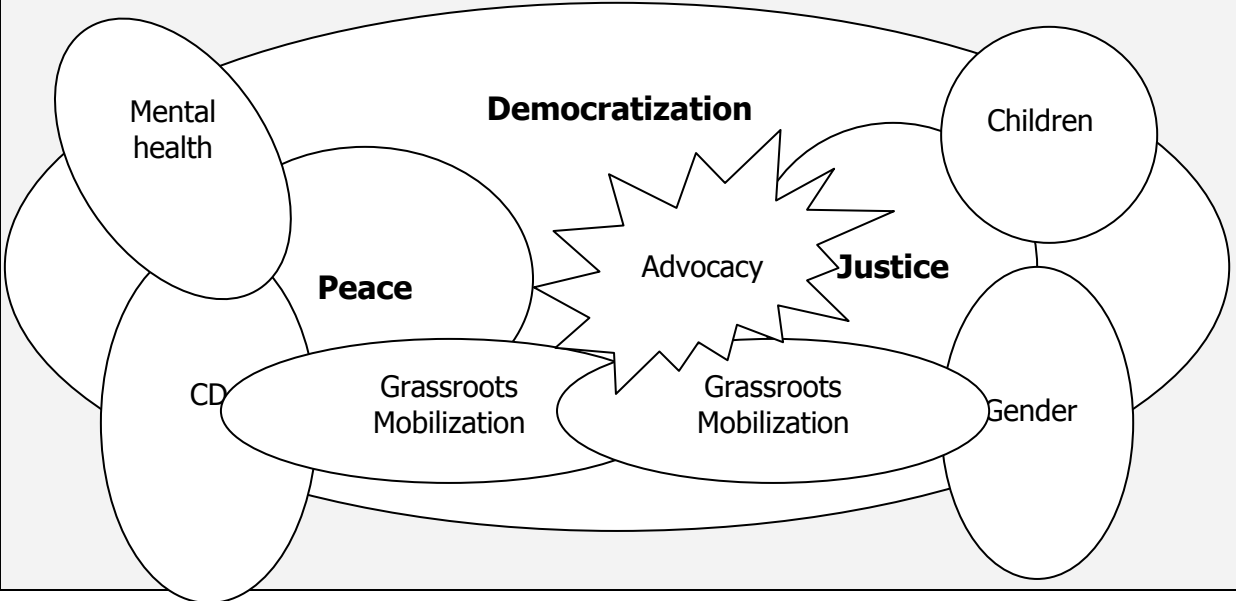
Among other things it suggested:

- That livelihood issues are the most feasible entry point for supporting local public demands for accountability and responsiveness has also become more evident.
- That the plethora of NGO activity that has developed with donor support is in need of cross-sectoral (development - Human Rights) and cross-level (local - national) linkages to increase impact and that there are many questions marks about how to best facilitate such linkages is increasingly clear.

The clustering of shared objectives evident in the current ICCO-Kerkinactie partner network (see Annex....) can be recognized as providing a good starting point for developing a program that takes the above suggestions into account.

The figure below visualizes a program outline at this moment in the programming process. It builds upon the current partner networks and looks for bridges between community development, mental health and peace building organizations (the peace ‘pillar’) and human rights, legal aid, gender and child rights organizations (the justice ‘pillar’), and between the two pillars through grassroots mobilization and advocacy in order to strengthen democratic space.

**ICCO-Kerkinactie program outline**



<sup>46</sup> Henke, R. & Hong, H. (June 2007)

<sup>47</sup> CAS (2005), Executive summary. p.ii



The major reason to go for **two** workshops was that the preparatory phase, from the identification mission context analysis through to the group discussions for these workshops, had identified the justice sector 'approach'<sup>48</sup> of being watchdogs and the 'peace building' approach of community organizers as the two dominant ways of working with communities.

Another outcome of the preparatory group meetings was that ICCO did specify an overall goal for its support to Cambodian organizations: **To strengthen communities' ability for collective action.**

Given the lack of familiarity with joint strategic thinking of Cambodian NGOs – partly caused by, as well as reflected in the mainstream way of program development by donors – the facilitator designed a process that emphasized shared exploration of the following issues:

- What do we (i.e. the Cambodian NGOs) mean by "community"?
- Different kinds of community organization
- NGO perceptions of what makes for strong communities
- Problems faced by NGOs in supporting community self mobilization efforts
- How can NGOs better support community organizing?
- How can NGOs influence the context?
- What can NGOs do to better organize themselves?
- What do NGOs need/expect from ICCO?

This strategy did result in lively discussions regarding the overall goal as well as the needs for, problems with and lack of understanding about *strategic collective action of NGOs in support of communities*.

At the end of the second workshop day the facilitator (and the ICCO staff present) tried to elicit some specific suggestions for 'NGO coalition' objectives but nothing much beyond a shopping list of issues *that ICCO should consider* emerged, emphasizing again the novelty of asking NGOs to formulate a shared agenda *of their own*.

ICCO used this opportunity to rephrase its ambition even more explicitly than before. All, ICCO included, had conceptualized the 'work' during the meeting as being part of the development of an *ICCO program*. However, this is a misleading conception: ICCO is looking to support collective action by natural coalitions of Cambodian NGOs (and other stakeholders), and this implies that it is their agenda should take priority rather than an ICCO program framework. The coalition objectives should have an existence that is independent of ICCO support and thus any 'program' that ICCO uses to summarily describe what it supports in Cambodia. Obviously, coalition objectives may only be partially realized without the support of ICCO (or any other donor) but to the extent that they are really based on the 'core business' of the respective coalition members and a shared ambition of the members, it would be a misnomer to call them an 'ICCO program'. The point made at the closing of the meeting was thus that ICCO did not need to be convinced of the importance of particular issues, but NGOs would need to convince each other of the need for collective NGO action regarding particular issues<sup>49</sup>.

The workshops were thus a useful stage setting event for designing next steps. And this assessment held equally for the Cambodian NGOs and for ICCO.

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<sup>48</sup> Finding labels for things like this is an ongoing effort, both in English and in Khmer. All available terms have a multitude of possible meanings and connotations for different people. Somewhere down the line the process will have to result in a short glossary specifying how 'we' use 'sector', 'network', 'coalition', 'community', etc. etc.

<sup>49</sup> Sjoerd Haagsma rephrased our ambition like this during his closing remarks

## 2.4 Third workshop: from programming to action learning<sup>50</sup>

The three main lessons for ICCO were that:

- Describing NGOs in terms of only two approaches to working with and on behalf of communities (community organizers and watchdogs) is too coarse. A better categorization of approaches is: community organizers, watchdogs, peace builders, and advocates;
- We needed to rely more explicitly on pre-existing natural coalitions in order to have any chance of coalition objectives to emerge bottom up.
- We needed to start handing over the process to Cambodians in order to put our actions where our words are.

The process chosen to accomplish both was:

- Identify some individuals with an inherent interest in what ICCO tries to do, able to collectively 'represent' the approaches that a comprehensive pallet of Democratization and peace Building interventions requires, some legitimacy in the eyes of the NGO world as being able to transcend their organizational affiliation, and good facilitation skills.
- Request them to constitute a Program Development Team (PDT) that takes charge of the follow up, supported by the ICCO program coordinator, and when and where necessary a team of expat capacity builders with specific expertise and skills that at some stage might come in handy.

The four individuals identified who agreed to take charge of the process were:

- Meas Nee, director of Village Focus International (non-ICCO partner; community organizer)
- Yeng Virak, director of CLEC (minor CB support from ICCO; watchdog)
- Neb Sinthay, director of API (ICCO partner; advocacy organization)
- Soth Plai Ngarm, director of ACT (ICCO partner; peace builder)

These individuals agreed to this role within a pre-existing agenda of ICCO to host a next generation of program development workshops in November<sup>51</sup>. The PDT, met several times to clarify their own understanding of NGO coalitions (versus 'shared projects' on the one hand and 'networks' on the other), and on the basis of that shared understanding each member identified existing groups of collaborating NGOs that they considered potential NGO coalitions. Each contacted (a selection of) their own groups that they considered good candidates for collectively exploring what it takes to be(come) a coalition.

In the preparation for the workshop the PDT decided to de-emphasize the context of program development and focus on exchange of experiences and shared learning. Their assessment was that collaborating groups of NGOs do not yet conform to what they would consider a *real* NGO coalition, and that the more potential coalitions could be engaged in an 'action learning' way the less risks of them engaging primarily for envisioned continued and/or future donor support. The successive invitations to the workshops reflect this change in emphasis.

The main objective of the workshop was thus defined as providing a platform in which NGO coalitions can learn from each other by discussing the objectives and strategies of their collaborations. What do they aim for? What is the contribution of the various coalition members? What would help them to increase chances of success? It was also explicitly emphasized that (non-) invitations to the workshops were not related to ICCO funding. Over two days a total of 33 NGOs participated, 11 of which currently receive ICCO support, and an additional four in contract discussions with ICCO. In other words only 45% of participating NGOs could be called ICCO partners in the traditional sense. The process for the two days was exactly the same and was designed by the PDT. The ICCO program coordinator was present but with a role limited to opening and closing the days, and more as representing the donor making this learning event possible than as a donor bringing partner organizations around the table.

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<sup>50</sup> Most of the descriptions in this section have been taken from Meas, N., Neb, S., Soth, P. N. & Yeng, V. (December 2007)

<sup>51</sup> See Henke, R. & Hong, H. (June 2007)

For me personally the changing dynamic was exciting and also instructive. The four members of the PDT all are very experienced NGO workers, all have overseas educational experience, and all are well-known for their facilitation skills. Nevertheless the very first thing they did was clarify for and amongst themselves what exactly the envisioned process was about. More and especially more effective 'networking' of NGOs is a well-known donor interest in Cambodia and would not have required further discussion. But the ICCO talk of 'coalitions', with *strategic* objectives only achievable by coordinating *existing* organizational resources and expertise, did require some explicit exchange of understandings, even amongst this NGO 'elite'. Their collective experience with collaborations amongst NGOs allowed didn't make that a particularly difficult conceptual exercise but it was very evident from their discussions that the difficulties encountered to date in productively engaging partner Cambodian NGOs in discussions on coalition objectives did indeed reflect the introduction of something *new*. It was also revealing to see their worries:

- About how to avoid, circumvent, get rid of the link between discussing coalition objectives and (ICCO) funding, i.e. the donor orientation;
- About how to avoid being seen as 'in charge', i.e. more than 'facilitators', and all the baggage of hidden self interest, nepotism and thus trust that that implies;

The workshops started with a PFDT facilitated process of being on the same page regarding what the workshops were about. This was achieved by a brainstorm on various ways of collaboration between NGOs. It was obvious that there is no consistent labeling of different models of working together. What one calls a network, an other calls an alliance, coalition, or working group. Words used in this brainstorm were: network, working group, coalition, shared project, association (membership organization), federation, partnership, forum. Nevertheless, the brainstorm resulted in a shortlist of common set of characteristics/principles of NGO collaboration:

- Joint objectives
- Joint perspectives
- Joint strategies
- Joint responsibilities
- Shared interests
- Joint achievements

As box 10 shows the problems were with the aimed for *strategic* nature of what we understand as *coalition* objectives (primarily based upon existing resources).

**Box10: Some reflections on the workshops**

- It seems that the journey towards identifying natural coalitions has finally hit home. Even with all their weaknesses, the groups invited all recognized the workshop questions as legitimate explorations of what *they* are about.
- Side-lining ICCO and program development has proven to be a productive strategy. Although questions about ICCO's interest and the relation between activities like this and funding are unavoidable, this was the first time that participating NGOs seemed to take their own (shared) interest as a starting point rather than only focusing on donor interest.
- A practical aspect of this was conducting the workshop in Khmer, doing away with plenary translation altogether. Doing away with special plenary attention to donor representatives seems to underline the explicit message that this is primarily an exchange between Cambodian NGO groups.
- The "coalition" concept seems better understood than before but it is also very evident that Collaboration on a specific strategic objective, primarily based on existing resources, with clear understanding of roles and responsibilities, and practical arrangements for coordination in place is a rare "model" of collaboration in Cambodia. "Networking", and its institutionalized version of with secretariat (seen by the PDT as NOGization) and shared projects are the dominant collaboration modalities.
- In the Cambodian NGO world strategic collaboration hardly exists yet and will need explicit facilitation to grow.

The workshops also provided interesting insights into what concretely hampers strategic collaborations in Cambodia (see box 11):

**Box 11: Factors working against the development of strategic collaborations**

- It requires basic trust amongst senior management of the participating NGOs, while many are de facto competitors for the same donor funds
- Given basic trust, event-organizing and case-based collaboration works reasonably well established but more long-term strategic collaboration seems problematic (in line with the event/case-based nature of local ways of organizing collective action?); also formulating a shared project together is a modality of collaboration that many NGOs are familiar and comfortable with. However, exploring possible value addition by collaborating upon *existing* work is new. When discussion collaboration the familiar ways tend to take over.
- Even event and case-based collaboration is very time intensive; identifying a shared strategic objective, strategies etc. even more so.
- This is often phrased in terms of a resistance against formalization/institutionalization but framing it as such can only convey a partial truth. Event and case-based collaborations also need structure. So it needs to be made more explicit which aspects of "institutionalization" exactly are resisted. It seems to me that the problems occur as soon as decision-making authority is being delegated to a "structure".
- Most NGOs still have a donor focus rather than setting their own (shared) agenda by exploring with each other what they can do on their own. When thinking collaboration they are focused on how to extend their current activities, tapping (additional) donor support, rather than focusing on what they could do together now, on the basis of their existing resources and possibilities, and what they would have to change internally (within their own organization and in the ways they deal with each other within the coalition).

An issue that was not further explored but emerged as definitely in need of further 'work' is who sets the agenda for collaboration. For some kinds of collaboration that is clear, e.g. in membership organizations the agenda setting (in theory) is up to a general assembly or delegated to a board, however in objective-oriented collaborations between NGOs supporting grassroots action, it is much less clear. One way to think about what this is all about is true (rather than rhetorical) empowerment. Donors' – in this case ICCO's – role is to empower their NGO partners to deal with their issues in a sovereign way. Sovereign means that the partners truly own the objectives that they collectively pursue. However, these objectives in turn address the empowering support to grassroots' groups, implying that the NGOs have to find ways in which they can ensure that their objectives follow the agenda of those grassroots groups.

**2.5 What's next?**

The workshops proceedings were reviewed by the PDT resulting in a list to do for the following half year. Box 12 gives an abridged version of this plan<sup>52</sup>:

**Box 12: PDT activities first half of 2008**

- Follow up with all NGO groups individually with a list of additional questions in order to get a more complete picture of the actual status of their collaboration
- Follow up with at least two groups as pilots in facilitation of coalition development (individual follow up plus two workshops)
- Analytic work: initiate PDT facilitated development of program components
- Context description: ongoing mapping of community activists, their networks, and support structures
- Explore possibilities for linkages with Community Peace Building Network
- Planning of three cross-cutting events (on bringing community activists and networks together with NGOs; action research/learning as a methodology; on civic education)
- A couple of 'case studies', one of which is a glossary Khmer & English of terms used for collaboration.
- Start think tank discussion meetings inviting Cambodian intellectuals to discuss specific issues to provide the PDT with input and a sounding board
- Define ToR for support by individual Program support team members (PDT)

<sup>52</sup> the full draft is available as (December 2007) PDT planning of activities January – June 2008

Looking forward I foresee that the difficulties we've encountered with building ICCO support upon strategic program coalitions are going to determine the process agenda for a considerable period to come. It is my conviction that the issues we struggle with are pretty fundamental problems for Cambodia in general<sup>53</sup>, that this analysis is shared by at least some Cambodians, amongst whom the members of the PDT, and that change is possible but certainly not upon donor time schedules.

At the same time I feel that we have cut a crucial corner and can start addressing other issues without running too many risks of being seen as determining the agenda. The underneath is a shortlist of the issues that need attention, in no particular order.

The action plan already contains events focusing on the interaction between NGOs and communities. As remarked earlier, one way of looking at what ICCO tries to do in Cambodia is to see it as part of a putting the first last dynamic. Co-responsibility here means that we as a donor take second seat to our NGO partners who in turn should be expected to do the same with respect to their 'beneficiaries', 'clients', or whatever the best designation for those who should set the agenda might be (again, language is a barrier here, each term representing a whole discourse and mostly a 'wrong' one at that). It is important to get this issue on our shared agenda – and this is an opinion that at least some of the PDT members explicitly share – because the process of defining NGO coalition objectives should be based on NGO awareness of their place in the scheme of things.

The above action plan refers to 'analytic' work that is needed to start framing emerging coalition objectives into some kind of coherent narrative. This is going to be a very interesting co-responsibility exercise because the resulting narrative has to be owned by the PDT and the core implementing NGOs but also work for ICCO. My personal vision for this is that for the time being we have to continue<sup>54</sup> to develop narratives on parallel tracks, one top-down, but as process-oriented as possible, and one bottom up, starting with coalition objectives. I expect that real co-responsibility, and thus merging the two tracks, is only possible when both 'parties' develop sufficient common ground regarding their understanding of the drivers of societal change. I intuit that we have precious little understanding of each other's (often implicit) understandings of what I would call our policy theories. We have no difficulty agreeing upon following a rights-based approach, striving for justice, democracy and peace, etc., but that is not enough to underwrite practical interventions. In general, the intellectual development agenda is set by Northern agencies and their governments. But that agenda is normally much better in spelling out targets than in arguing for pathways. E.g. NGO donors like ICCO self-define as supporting civil society, looking for change through this arena in-between state and market, but we do not have much explicit policy theory about what this implies in practice<sup>55</sup>. As far as I am aware, I am not alone in feeling a bit at a loss, and there is some ongoing work in the world of development think tanks that addresses this lacuna<sup>56</sup>. I see this as an interesting opportunity to develop a shared policy theory narrative of how and why the activities that ICCO supports are expected to contribute to the higher level objectives, phrased in big words like justice, peace and democracy.

One possibility that I would personally promote as a promising candidate is the approach presented by Alan Fowler in *Civic driven change and international development: exploring a complexity perspective civic driven change perspective*<sup>57</sup>, a 'state of the art' paper commissioned by the program on Civic Driven Change started by Context, international cooperation. The attraction of this approach lies in its promise to provide a foundation for both our substantial objectives in Cambodia and the process approach applied to further those objectives.

The next phase of 'program' development is also going to have to deal with issues of 'leadership' and 'management'. The PDT feels clearly more comfortable with directing an action learning process than with 'managing' a 'program'. At present I am very hesitant to push the envelope too early. We

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<sup>53</sup> See e.g. Henke R. (2007)

<sup>54</sup> 'Continue' because we presently proceed like this. There is a developing ICCO program plan that is envisioned to merge at a certain moment in the future with the Cambodian narrative: Haagsma, S. (August 2007)

<sup>55</sup> I might be projecting my own discomfort onto my colleagues here; as stated in the preface, one objective of this think piece is to initiate some explicit debate about my own understandings and prejudices, hopefully to the benefit of at least some others too

<sup>56</sup> E.g. Eyben, R. & Ladbury, S. (June 2006) and Fowler, A. (November 2007)

<sup>57</sup> Fowler, A. (November 2007)

probably will have to be very creative in designing 'structures' that institutionalize responsibilities and authority. It might be interesting to follow the ongoing support experiments to networks of grassroots activists closely and mirror structures that seem effective<sup>58</sup>. In taking our guidance from the grassroots we would also remain true to the general putting the first last maxim underlying our approach to supporting Cambodian developments.

By way of closing remark I want to return to my very first involvement with ICCO program development. On the one hand, the journey from the 2005 identification mission report to where we are now has been a continuous surprise, and all but straightforward. On the other, lots of what I learned during the identification mission seems as valid today as it was then. The mission report proposed 'a knowledge management based strategy for continuous development of a Cambodia country program' (see Annex 2). That proposal was motivated by two drivers:

- My background as a researcher and enthusiast for evidence-based policy and practice, and
- The mission finding that many written sources as well as expat and Cambodian informants professed ignorance about what makes the country tick.

We now definitely seem on our way towards an action learning based strategy of program development but not because of a socially engineered trajectory but because that is what 'emerged' out of our 'process'. Sure, I am tempted to claim credit for my foresight, but after serving you 20 pages of going-with-the-flow learning-by-doing that would be way too pompous an ending for this paper.

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<sup>58</sup> See Henke (2008)

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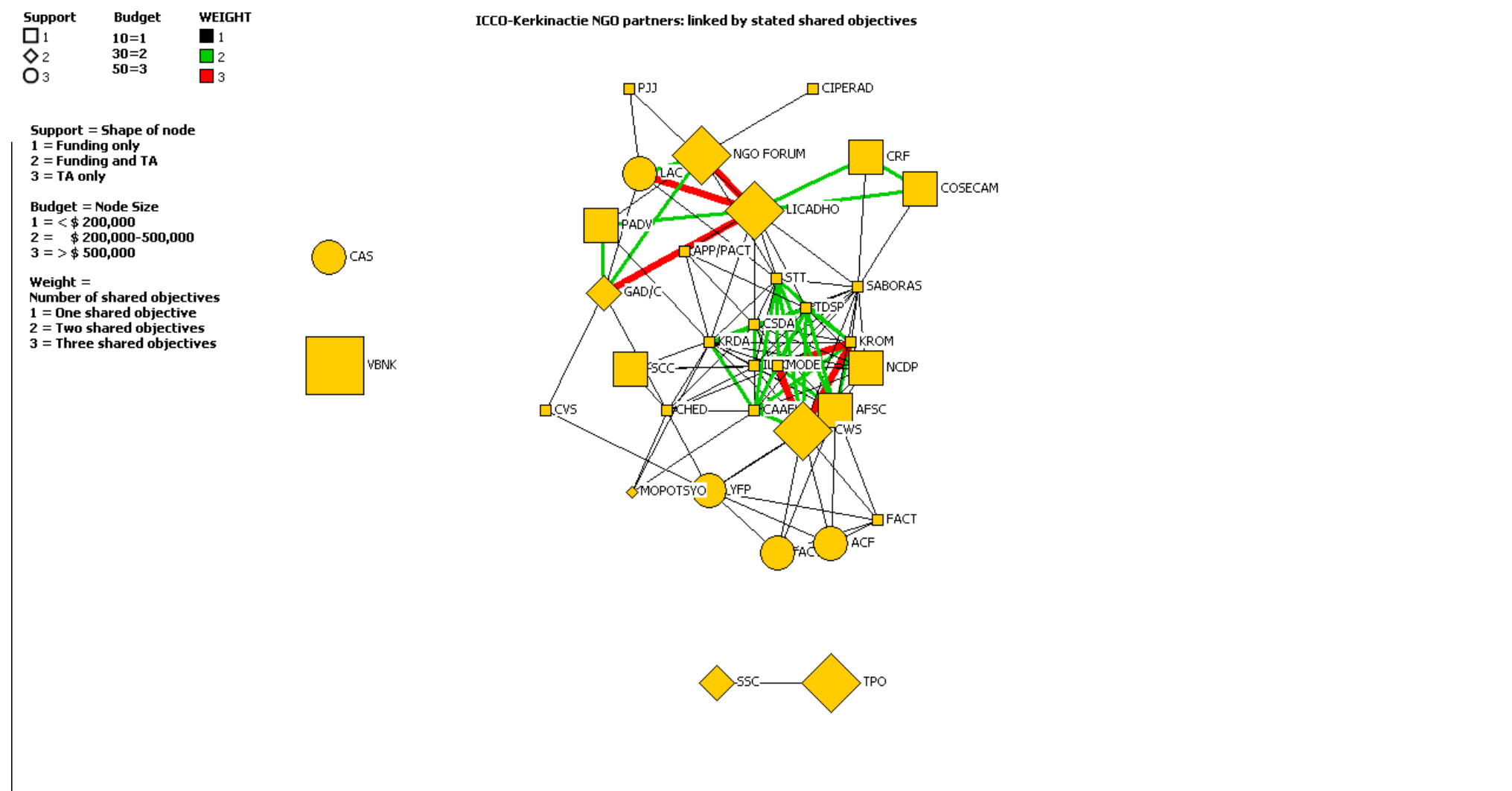


## **Annexes**

Annex 1: ICCO-Kerkinactie partner network baseline December 2006. Shared objectives as relationships between partners

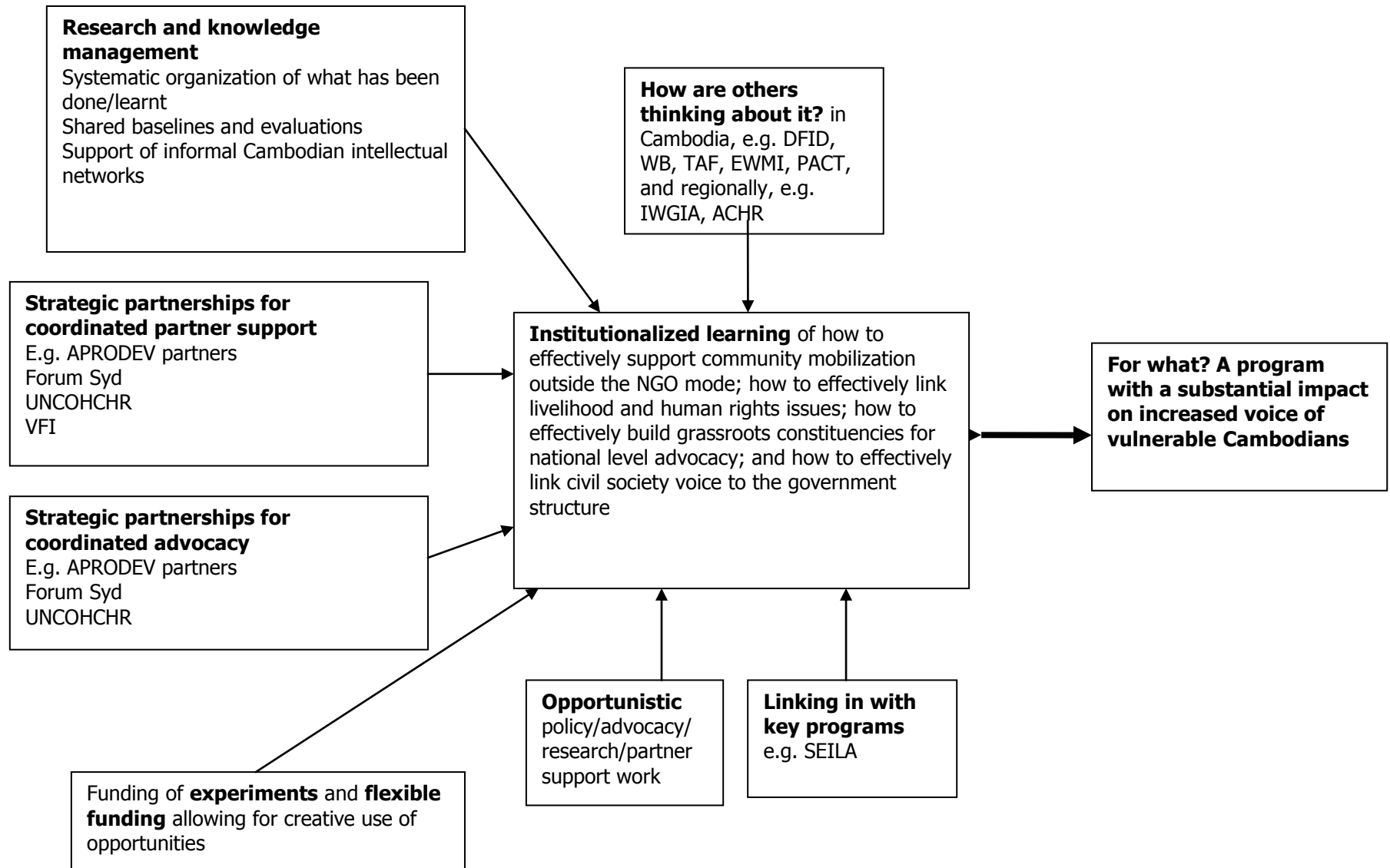
Annex 2: The core elements of a knowledge management based strategy for continuous development of a Cambodia country program

# Annex 1: ICCO-Kerkinactie partner network baseline December 2006. Shared objectives as relationships between partners<sup>59</sup>



<sup>59</sup> Henke, R & Hong, H. (March 2007), p.21

**Annex 2: The core elements of a knowledge management based strategy for continuous development of a Cambodia country program<sup>60</sup>**



<sup>60</sup> Chhim, K. & Henke, R. (November 2005), p.30