

THINK TANK CAPACITY BUILDING FOR BETTER POLICY IMPACT: CDRI 25 YEAR'S EXPERIENCE.

Dr CHHEM Rethy, Executive Director, CDRI

The purpose of this talk is to share with the audience CDRI's 25 years of experience as a leading think tank in Cambodia. *An organisation is only as strong as its people and its partners.* I will look at how CDRI developed its intellectual capital and engaged with partners and donors while maintaining its independence.

INTRODUCTION

Vision for Cambodia

CDRI's vision is for a prosperous, inclusive and integrated Cambodia that continues to make progress in sustainable development and poverty reduction, democratisation, natural resource management, and gender equity.

Vision for CDRI

CDRI is an independent and resilient centre of research excellence for innovative ideas to influence policy that impacts on Cambodia's development.

Mission statement

CDRI's mission is to generate high quality, influential and impactful knowledge through policy research and capacity development to contribute to Cambodia's prosperity.

Core values and operating principles

M We create the professional conditions that nurture **merit**.

E We foster **excellence**, as a professional and personal habit.

R We practice a culture of **respect** and **responsibility**.

I We pledge to live and act with **independence** and **integrity**.

T We build deep **trust, transparency** and teamwork, capable of achieving the mission and vision of the Institute.

Balancing between independence and engagement

The value of this approach was affirmed by the independent appraisal commissioned by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) for their mid-term review (2011-16) programme of partnership and support for CDRI (www.sida.se/publications). One of the key findings was that CDRI had “managed the balance of independence and engagement well”, being seen as a constructive but critical actor in policy debate in a complex political environment. They found this to be the case in both its research products and public forums, and in its private dialogue with government and other influential stakeholders in Cambodia’s development.

WHAT RESOURCES TO IMPACT POLICY?

1. Financial resources, partner engagement and branding

A striving think tank needs to continually create an environment conducive for policy research while engaging policymakers and relevant partners to use its research outputs. To achieve this goal, think tank leaders design a blueprint to foster creative fundraising ideas, passion for research and innovation, intensive cultivation of the brand, and strategic partnerships (Selee 2013). All think tank directors agonise over every detail when building an effective fundraising strategy.

Over decades CDRI has been able to lay solid foundations for fundraising through solid collaboration with most of the multilateral and bilateral partners in Cambodia’s development, but it has had two genuine development partners who have strongly supported our goals and

activities—Sida and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada. Sida has been with CDRI from early in its history, building its support over the years until it is now CDRI's most significant long-term partner. This partnership has allowed research on governance and public sector reform, education, skills and employment, and climate change to grow steadily. IDRC has provided invaluable medium- to long-term support for CDRI's GMS Development Analysis Network (GMS-DAN) and an innovative programme on climate change and water resource governance in Cambodia, a partnership of CDRI with the Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology, Tonle Sap Authority, Institute of Technology of Cambodia and Royal University of Agriculture.

Also important is a strong and committed Board of Directors whose members are willing to tap into their own networks to fund an organisation they believe in. Our current Chairman, HE Dr Sok Siphana, is one such a person devoted to seeing a think tank succeed in its branding and fundraising efforts. Indeed, the Executive Director of a think tank is actually the “fundraiser-in-Chief”, whose dedication is essential to the overall plan to secure adequate funding for policy research.

2. Building capacity and research talent resource development

An organisation is only as strong as its people. This is true in all sectors including think tanks. Developing talent through genuine local capacity building is as important as securing funding. A pool of talented experienced researchers with the right leadership would be able to team up to produce high quality peer-reviewed policy-relevant materials, develop engaged partnerships and build a strong brand attractive to potential funders. In addition to fundraising, attracting and retaining the best research talent should be an obsession and a passion for think tank directors.

What does ‘real’ capacity building mean to CDRI?

Quoting Larry Strange (2014, 13), “On any day, the lobbies of Phnom Penh’s hotels are full of signs directing participants to a wide range of development seminars, workshops and other events. Many of these are promoted as “capacity building” but they are in fact short-term training or awareness raising exercises, some of value, some not, and often piecemeal, superficial and without sound research foundations”.

Our experience at CDRI has taught us that effective institutional capacity development, particularly for a research institution, involves a combination of institutional needs analysis, institutional redesign and strengthening, the upgrading of educational and professional qualifications and skills through postgraduate education, professional development and training programmes, the provision of expert technical advice and skills transfer, as well as institutional collaboration, personnel exchanges and internship schemes. It can also be most effective, in our local context, when it involves longer-term institutional collaboration between weaker and stronger research institutions, particularly in the countries of our region (ASEAN, China, South Korea and Japan) where longer-term economic and development relationships will lie.

Over-reliance on expensive international consultants and technical advisers, often short-term rather than long-term investments in building local capacity and ownership, means capacity substitution rather than capacity development, and entrenches dependency. “Real” institutional capacity building is a mindset and culture that requires strong commitment; it is demanding for both management and staff; it is challenging to design effectively; it must be strongly internally owned and driven; it usually requires both internal and external expertise; it is expensive and time consuming; and it is never completed, as an institution’s environment and client needs change. Finally sending our staff abroad for further studies is contributing to fostering research talent development not only for CDRI and for Cambodia.

Currently, 14 CDRI staff are on study leave to pursue postgraduate (8 doctoral, 6 master’s) studies abroad in Japan, Australia, USA, Canada and Thailand in the field of development (sustainability science, agriculture, economics and policy).

CONCLUSION

This year CDRI is celebrating 25 years of policy research excellence. So much has been achieved. Much more needs to be done. Cambodia has also grown tremendously over the decades. Social changes are deep and real. Major new challenges loom on the horizon. The funding environment has evolved. ASEAN integration and China's rise will impact on Cambodia's political and economic agenda. All these changes should be embraced. CDRI needs to strive further to reach new heights. The key to achieving this ambition is to continue to strengthen its internal capacity and develop its research talent while remaining deeply engaged with genuine committed partners and seeking to establish new robust partnerships.

Selee, Andrew. 2013. *What Should Think Tanks do? A Strategic Guide to Policy Impact*.

Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.

Strange, Larry. 2014. "My Decade with CDRI – A Personal Reflection." *Cambodia Development Review* 18(4): 12-16.