Synthesis Analysis of Self-Assessment Surveys
Evaluation of Aid Effectiveness in Cambodia
August 2008

Background
The Concept Note for the Evaluation on Aid Effectiveness in Cambodia (June 2008) proposed that a self-assessment be undertaken by development partners and by TWGs as an important input to the overall evaluation exercise. By August 18th, fourteen TWGs and nine development partners (4 UN agencies comprising the consolidated UN response) had responded.[1] The survey exercise was voluntary and the participation rate was itself seen as an indicative indicator of commitment to the aid effectiveness work in Cambodia.

Respondents were asked to use the 'most significant change' (MSC) methodology. This approach was adopted for a number of reasons:

   a) MSC presents a useful mental model for multi-stakeholder reflection and enquiry;
   b) MSC challenges users to identify priority issues (rather than lists) and their root causes;
   c) MSC is an efficient tool for presenting and consolidating multiple sources of data.

The main thrust of the evaluation is to consider past and future challenges/progress as they relate to: (i) the linkage between aid delivery and the attainment of development results; and (ii) the capacity development impact of aid. The findings, although subjective, can (subject to validation and challenge) be used to inform the direction of the independent review phase of the evaluation in their aggregated form, as well as being used to inform more in-depth analysis and enquiry.

This synthesis identifies five key messages that can be derived from the 27 self-assessment questionnaires that were returned. Rather than attempt to cluster the findings around the 5 pillars of the national (and global) aid effectiveness frameworks the findings are contextualized in a manner that attempts to 'tell the story' of the aid effectiveness experience in Cambodia.

Five Key Messages

Message number one: Aid effectiveness work may be too process-driven to be effectively linked to the achievement of development results

Is the survey response rate (and general quality) an indicator of commitment?
A higher response rate from development partners was expected, although many non-respondents are known to be closely engaged in central and sectoral initiatives. The TWG response rate (14/18) was very high and a reflection of the efforts made to establish an information sharing network across TWG secretariats. Although coverage is not comprehensive there is a relatively high degree of consistency in many of the emerging themes, suggesting that the findings are relatively robust. It was also observed that many of the responses tended to resemble lists, rather than most significant incidents, and sometimes reflected a rather process-driven approach to the implementation of aid effectiveness initiatives.

Is aid effectiveness work relevant? What is conspicuous by its absence?
Few respondents addressed this directly. Implicitly there appears to be some evidence that aid effectiveness is becoming 'bureaucrat-ised' and implemented (either through policy announcements or concrete action) without challenge as yet one more process amongst many. This approach may lead to a lack of focus on realizing meaningful results and will certainly make any link to achieving improved development outcomes much more challenging.

In contrast to the evidence of an excessively process-oriented approach to aid effectiveness, there is a much more dynamic consensus around the need to strengthen links within and between the central agencies and the line ministries. From a global perspective, the broader commitments of the Paris Declaration (e.g. coherent plan/budget/PBA links) appear much more meaningful than the narrower 12 indicators, and this should perhaps be reflected in future national policy and monitoring frameworks. The issues that matter appear to relate more to ownership (leadership, clearly articulated and integrated development frameworks) and to mutual accountability (trust, authenticity of the aid partnership, information sharing).

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[1] TWGs: A&W, Forest & Env, Gender, Health, HIV/AIDS, LJR, RWSSH, MA, Edn, PPR, Fisheries, PAR, FSN, PFM. DPs: AusAid, Denmark, Japan, NZAID, WB, DFID, UN (ILO, UNDP, UNICEF, WFP), Global Fund, France.

It is noteworthy that there is little mention of some issues that had previously received considerable attention: PIU integration, mission overload, common analytical work, tied aid are all conspicuous by their absence. Conditionality was not mentioned at all and practices that might pass off as conditionality were not as common as one might anticipate. One hypothesis to be tested is that these issues are simply not considered to be serious obstacles to aid effectiveness in Cambodia. Another theme that was seldom identified was transaction costs. Although fragmentation, the aggregate costs of aid management, was discussed, the individual costs of project management were not. This may be attributed to the survey respondents who may not be directly affected, or it may be that the RGC, after 15 years of aid dependency has become well adapted to managing donor projects and sees this as a normal part of doing business.

Aid effectiveness: an industry apart?

It follows therefore that there may be some risk of an emerging 'aid effectiveness industry', a proliferation of aid effectiveness advisers, for example, whose work may not necessarily make a real contribution to the work of any sector or programme. The association of these activities with identified individuals and the stand alone nature of their work may also result in the 'curse of the cross-cutting issue' as others neglect this work (several development partners identified competence across the office . for both individuals and systems . as a challenge). Reducing aid effectiveness work to a parochial beauty contest amongst a handful of individuals will further erode the link to development impact and results.

Message number two: The most effective path to development results is via the virtuous circle between ownership and capacity

The 'soft side' matters to the promotion of ownership…

Results, in terms of competently developed sector plans and well-managed programme-based approaches, appear to be strongly correlated to where development partners have identified ownership. TWGs acknowledge that partnerships can take time to build but assert that ownership comes with trust, which in turn results in increased capacity. The direction of causality between ownership and capacity is unclear but the virtuous circle between them resonates strongly throughout the survey feedback. The role of both RGC and development partner leadership . whether at an organisational level or personified in an individual champion - is also frequently cited by development partners. This is likely to be related to, but distinct from, ownership, especially when related to the 'political level'. Development partners have a clear role to play in promoting ownership according to TWGs: they should engage constructively to build trust (LJR), they should focus their capacity-development efforts on these non-technical but critical skills (Health) and their support should be less fragmented (HIV/AIDS).

…but a focus on the 'harder' set of competencies is an important complement…

While leadership appears to be a crucial factor, the more concrete aspects of partnership also matter. The most frequently observed factor in supporting ownership, and a major determinant in linking aid to development results, is the production of a coherent and comprehensive sector strategy or plan. This works in three ways, first as the process fosters a closer working relationship; second, as the plan itself provides the basis for providing support based on national priorities; and third, because some form of accountability can then be introduced. Progress in developing sector plans, especially plans that address the issue of capacity, has been mixed. Where they have been established, however, TWGs make some reference to development partner non-compliance with RGC requests (to use RGC systems, to share information, to participate in meetings). The mixed response of development partners indicates that: (a) RGC owns the 'wrong things'; (b) development partner commitment is lacking; or (c) development partner capacity to comply is weak. (These latter two issues are discussed below).

…and linkages between central processes require further strengthening…

Whereas the most acknowledged success was in the development of sector plans, the most commonly identified challenge was in the relations between the three central agencies that coordinate the NSDP, the PIP, the Budget and aid financing (MoP, MEF, CDC respectively) and the link between these central agencies and the line ministries. While the NSDP was not identified as a tool to facilitate rigorous alignment, its role in bringing together the multiple sectoral strategies in a single over-arching framework was acknowledged. The missing piece of the puzzle is the absence of a robust institutional link on the financing side: the PIP, the Budget, and projections of external financing.[2] The challenge of linking sectoral plans and budgets to a costed medium-term financing framework may be exacerbated by the lack of coordination at this central level.

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[2] This has also been the focus for recent global research that advocates for simpler, more direct, yet more effective, planning and budgeting processes for allocating resources to priority activities. See World Bank (2007), 'Minding the Gaps'.

…ideally in the context of advancing the core reforms and programme approaches

TWG feedback almost universally identifies the importance of the core reforms (PFM, PAR, D&D, LJR) to implementing sector strategies. Development partners also identify the need for a rational and functional link between the central strategic planning, budgeting and monitoring roles with the implementation and reporting role of the sectors. Most development partners see the core reforms and associated programme-based approaches at sector level as the main vehicle for capacity development activities. There was little reflection on the role of technical cooperation, nor was there any discussion of central strategies on Human Resource Development (HRD) as a part of the broader PAR and capacity development framework, although CAR did relate the progress it has made in establishing an HRD framework. Fewer TWG respondents discussed capacity in detail . although nearly all emphasised the role of MBPI in facilitating reform - but they did identify the sector plan and the PBA as the channel for directing and coordinating aid-financed support to capacity development.

Message number three: An effective and coherent development partner response is still a work in progress

Will development partners ever use Government systems?

Aligning resources to national priorities appears to have been implemented relatively well given the limits imposed by the availability of costed and budgeted programmes. Alignment to national systems appears to be more problematic however, as was noted during the Paris Declaration survey. It was particularly striking, for example, that development partners identified a range of internal and immediately-binding constraints that preclude them from implementing important Paris Declaration commitments (e.g. using PBAs, using RGC systems), yet their focus on future challenges almost without exception relates to the external environment and the actions they would like to see RGC take.

This point is brought into sharper focus in a number of TWG reports (especially fisheries) that recount progress in developing and strengthening a range of national systems. Yet few development partners use them. In health and education, TWGs note the progress made in developing their sector programmes but observe that few development partners are able to use Government systems or even to pool funds to reduce levels of fragmentation (where trust funds and parallel co-funding arrangements have been used these may create parallel systems with their own vested interests).

Where development partners have worked with RGC to develop capacity there is also frustration from their side where they feel their fellow development partners are not 'keeping their side of the bargain'. There had been some discussion at OECD/DAC about making use of partner country systems the 'default option' for inclusion in the Accra Agenda for Action; even the final commitment to "consider use of country systems as the first option" appears some way off at present.

Are development partners making progress on harmonisation…?

There are numerous examples of development partners sponsoring and signing 'partnership principles' or 'codes of conduct', and a 'roadmap', in the case of the EU partners. These initiatives should create a normative framework for harmonisation although one partner questioned their usefulness, especially when they remain at a general and aspirational level. The same partner questioned, moreover, if these principles actually detracted from more worthwhile activity or simply created a smokescreen, an illusion of compliance. This may be a worthwhile line of enquiry. Certainly it is true that there is some differentiation between stated commitment at the policy level (intended actions) and actual results (implementation) especially as some development partners note the operational constraints they face in harmonising procedures. For their part, the TWGs appear to communicate their preference for more harmonised . including pooled . modalities but they acknowledge the role of diversity also. Frequent appeals from TWGs to address the problem of fragmentation do not appear to be matched by a reciprocal development partner willingness to implement a more coherent division of labour (although this was previously a request of RGC).

…and is emerging/non-traditional donor engagement important?

The growth in the assistance programmes of 'non-traditional' development partners has been an important feature of the changing aid landscape in Cambodia over the last few years. A small number of development partners and TWGs suggest that more effort be made to engage with these partners and to bring them within the current frameworks for coordination and dialogue. The extent to which this is simply a procedural desire to standardize approaches or whether the current practices of non-traditional donors really imposes some kind of a constraint is unclear. The sectors that these donors work in (infrastructure, agriculture etc) lend themselves quite well to the project modality and details of their support is included in

the ODA Database. More analysis of these partners, their support and the efforts they make to comply with global norms for aid delivery may enlighten this discussion.

Message number four: Capacity to implement and monitor priority programmes is a glass half-full

Information and monitoring systems are slowly improving…
The survey responses of both TWGs and development partners support the view that the over-arching framework provided by the Rectangular Strategy and the NSDP must be complemented by more detailed and costed sector plans and budgets to support results-based implementation. Less mention is made of the need to facilitate learning and policy feedback through the use of monitoring and evaluation systems (although some partners and TWGs do discuss this). In developing these plans at sector level the function of TWGs has become rather differentiated, with some being used for information sharing (e.g. HIV/AIDS) while others (e.g. Mine Action) are actually used for decision-making purposes. Within the parameters intended to safeguard ownership this flexibility appears to work well. The next step may to make TWGs more effective in this review, monitoring & evaluation role.

…and a number of tools and processes seem to show promise…
A number of initiatives have been taken to support the results and monitoring linkage. The Joint Monitoring Indicators (JMIs) appear to work to the satisfaction of most development partners and TWGs, especially for bringing a results-based focus to the work of the TWG. Capacity to monitor JMIs is generally reported to be satisfactory (this should inform the initial choice of indicator) but in some cases capacity-related support to monitor sector indicators appears to require further attention. There is a consensus that the PBA context provides the context for support of this nature. Block grant support to the TWG secretariats appears to provide material and motivational support, although this support is relatively new and its impact needs to be considered over the longer-term.

…and cross-cutting issues show some encouraging signs of progress…
The experience of all the cross-cutting TWGs (LJR, A&W, Gender, RWS, HIV/AIDS, FSN) is remarkably similar. In light of recent global work on this topic, there is scope for bringing these TWGs together to consider how they might confront similar challenges. All of them report some progress, in particular where they have been able to facilitate or support activity in other institutions (e.g. through Gender Mainstreaming Action Groups) rather than by implementing activities directly. This perhaps provides an important lesson. But transaction costs in the TWG (number of participants required; convening, facilitating and following up multi-sectoral activity) are significant and TWGs can be constrained where participation/representation is not at the required level. The similar challenges identified in an 'unacknowledged' cross-cutting issue such as children was also raised by one development partner and the continued difficulties of incorporating multi-sectoral complexity into the aid effectiveness framework has been noted.

Mutual accountability: progress against a moving target
Definitions of mutual accountability in the global setting have been evolving, although the original Paris Declaration . and the subsequent national policy framework . was less ambiguous. Most TWGs appear to play a useful role as conduits for information exchange but the performance of a small number is still a cause for concern, particularly since a number of reviews and initiatives have been taken to explicitly address the performance of TWGs. It may be appropriate to revisit the initial prescriptions of TWG performance and to review once again the nature of the performance challenges that they face. The ODA Database is a welcome innovation for most development partners and TWGs, and where efforts to customise it have been made (A&W, Gender) it appears to work well at sector level, although one TWG (Health) sees the benefit in a custom-made system. More broadly, a number of TWGs identified the role of civil society in the TWG as positive, especially when related to an issue with clear socio-economic development implications (rural water, HIV/AIDS). Many other TWGs, and most development partners, saw a more high-profile role for civil society, primarily in their capacity as sector experts and representatives of important interests. Further clarification of this role may be useful for all parties as the RGC considers the future format of the GDCC and CDCF.

Message number five: Incentives and pay reform is an issue for everyone!
Almost without exception, every development partner and TWG respondent identified the issue of incentives and MBPI as a critical issue. This relates to the need to clarify the implementation status of Anukret 29, to incorporate MBPI into a sector programme, to implement as part of a broader PAR strategy, or to consider issues relating to sustainability. Some respondents also linked MBPI to the practice and impact of capacity development.

Conclusions: What is "most significant"?

The 'story' above attempts to let the evidence speak for itself. The contributions from development partners and TWGs are gratefully acknowledged. The point of evaluation is to ask the question "so what?", and the process of learning must include a reflection on whether simply to 'work harder' or to change the focus a little. With this in mind, the five key messages can, with some interpretation and perhaps a good deal of subjectivity, inform the following concluding recommendations:

1.   For RGC – the challenge of ownership

The strongest link between aid effectiveness and developmental impact is likely to manifest itself through the political will and technical capacity of RGC. This is consistent with much of the global analysis and it appears to work on two levels. First is the issue of policy coherency. Where a credible programme is put in place, and where strong ownership is demonstrated, the evidence emerging from the TWGs is that development partners are more inclined to respond positively and emphatically (either because they endorse the approach or simply because their ability to do otherwise is limited). Relationships of trust then become mutually reinforcing, especially where programmes have been implemented over an extended period.

Second is the issue of implementation capacity. This is required to 'press home' the opportunities that arise from the development of nationally-owned policies. Where the RGC is able to show effective leadership, it appears to develop the capacity to implement programmes more quickly. Similarly, where nascent capacity is already present it can be harnessed to improve policy formulation and cement ownership. The precise direction of causality is therefore uncertain, most likely is that leadership serves as a catalyst to cause both ownership and capacity to become linked in a virtuous circle. Again, this is not a new finding, but it resonates strongly in Cambodia. Reflecting more on the initial catalyst for leadership (e.g. accountability) may therefore make for an interesting and fruitful line of enquiry.

2.   For Development Partners – to re-focus on issues closer to home?

Most development partners identify binding constraints that preclude their ability to fully implement the commitments they have made to aid effectiveness. This includes procedural rules, staff competencies, and the development of new systems. When asked to identify the 'most significant' challenges, however, the response is more likely to focus on external considerations, usually more fundamental challenges (e.g. quality of national systems, medium-term budgeting) that are perhaps unlikely to thwart progress in the near-term when development partners need to first confront challenges closer to home (e.g. procedural rules that preclude the use of national systems, inability to provide estimates of medium-term financing). The plethora of commitments, roadmaps, codes of conduct, and action plans perhaps testifies to the need for a renewed focus on the internal challenges that partners face. Some form of initial mapping (possibly informed by the global evaluation prepared for the HLF) to compare the HQ/capital position of development partners against their actual programme delivery in Cambodia may be enlightening.

3.   For RGC and Development Partners - Commitment and consensus

In a recent induction for aid effectiveness practitioners, the Secretary General of CRDB/CDC challenged his audience to conduct themselves 'less like aid bureaucrats and more like development professionals'. As signatories to the Cambodia Declaration, and in addition to commitments made in the Paris Declaration, both RGC and development partners appear to have signaled their unequivocal support for the principles of aid effectiveness. Yet the evidence of implementation is more mixed; some progress in implementing procedural activities related to aid effectiveness have been undertaken but the prospect of them resulting in an enhanced development impact remains unclear.

The consensus view is that stronger central agency capacity to coordinate the funding of priority programmes, combined with line ministry capacity to implement detailed plans and budgets is the most critical area in which progress is required. Commitment is perhaps the missing piece in the puzzle, beginning with the issues identified above, i.e. to extend the ownership-capacity linkage for RGC, and to move into concrete implementation of commitments for development partners.