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The Multi-Cultural Iceberg

Exploring International Relationships in Cambodian Development Organisations

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Introduction

From time to time in the Cambodian development sector, Cambodians and foreigners will be heard to express mystification and bewilderment about each other. While this happens less now than in the past when Cambodians and foreigners had had less exposure to each other, it is a fact that a deep and pervasive lack of cross-cultural understanding still exists. The struggle to understand each other in ways that are truly meaningful continues unabated and underpins the even greater struggle to understand what is really going on inside the organisations where Cambodians and expatriates work together. And it must of course be acknowledged that the foreigners themselves come from many different cultures, are far from being a homogenous group and often mystify each other too.

Obvious differences between people often mask or confuse the more profound diversities that exist between the multi-cultural staff of an organisation. The dissimilarities of education and employment experience are easily noted and many Cambodians who work in international organisations have learned over time to be less surprised at the ways of foreigners, to adapt and accept, and to converse well in foreign languages. Relationships between the multi-cultural staff of an organisation are thus conducted on the basis of presenting

behaviours. The problems arise because there is little understanding that those behaviours, which can seem to represent similarities, are in fact disguising a range of very significant diversities, on which this paper will seek to elaborate. For instance, what does it mean for capacity building if the two parties to the process have a fundamentally different view of the *purpose* of learning, quite apart from experience and therefore expectations of widely different methodologies? How does a Cambodian who thinks of him or herself primarily as a member of a group respond to the individual analysis expected in a performance appraisal process? Might there be alternative, more collective forms of analytical processes that would be more appropriate in the Cambodian context?

The lack of understanding across cultures is of critical importance, because it is a primary cause of problems where there is an inability of people from different cultures to work together effectively (that term in itself is open to multiple cultural interpretations). Most multi-cultural organisations will have a history of great ideas that never became reality, the revised system which over time metamorphosed back to its previous form, the agreed action that never came to fruition. Such incidents are common and stem from the differences of understanding

that occur when people from different cultures work together. They are the tip of the multi-cultural iceberg.

Globally the development sector is structurally international and cross-cultural, but it appears that as yet little serious attention has been paid to the impact of cross-cultural issues in the functioning of the sector's organisations. Operating within the prevailing development paradigm in which some nations have resources and expertise which they give, with and without conditions, to others that do not, development organisations on the whole tend to reinforce rather than challenge that paradigm. A manifestation of the paradigm is that the power which is inherent to the ownership of resources and expertise largely denies much of value in the countries that need development aid and assistance. On the receiving end of this relationship, developing nations have found their own ways, sometimes creative, sometimes covert, to resist the concomitant pressure to accept and adapt to the ideas and practices of other cultures.

It should be noted at this stage that this paper gives an expatriate's analysis of the issues. The opinions offered therefore have advantages and disadvantages in terms of their perspectives on Cambodian culture, and how Cambodians and foreigners interact with each other. The main disadvantage and advantage are two sides of the same coin. Flaws in understanding inevitably occur when anyone attempts to analyse and understand a culture other than their own because their interpretations are always made through their own cultural ways of seeing the world. On the other hand the outsider is sometimes better placed to observe and analyse because anyone embedded in their own culture with no experience of another has difficulty in drawing pertinent observations about the nature of that culture.

Cambodia: Culture and History

Cambodian culture is as rich and diverse a mix as that of any nation. The strong and proud history of the Angkorian era embodied in Angkor Wat and wonderful traditions of dance, music and other arts contrasts sharply with the brutal and ignominious Khmer Rouge regime of more recent times. There are two studies which offer some insights into the fundamental beliefs on which Cambodians' traditional worldview is formed and the impact of recent history. First, however, it is worth noting that while Cambodia is rarely described as Confucian, two of the basic precepts of Confucian thinking about society are very relevant and give an indication of the historical and regional influences on the development of Cambodian culture.

- **The stability of society is based on unequal relations between people.** The junior partner owes the senior respect and obedience. The senior owes the junior partner protection and consideration.
- **The family is the prototype of all social organisations.** A person is not primarily an individual: rather he or she is a member of a family. ... Harmony is found in the maintenance of everybody's **face** (author's emphasis) in the sense of dignity, self-respect, and prestige. (Hofstede, 1980)

Some of the stronger characteristics of Cambodian society stem from those beliefs. Conformity with the order of things and not challenging the status quo are very strong guides for most people's behaviour to the extent that even asking a simple question of someone 'higher' than oneself is considered by many to be beyond what is possible or socially acceptable. Family and extended family networks are very important.

Everyone will know their place in their family and make a contribution accordingly. The strength of these guiding rules was noted by O’Leary and Meas (2001): ‘The social order of Cambodian society, reinforced by some Cambodian understandings of Buddhism, depends upon everyone respecting the social hierarchy and keeping her or his place in it. From childhood, people are taught to obey and respect those with authority. Challenging, questioning, and holding dissenting views are discouraged, conflict is seen as bad and loss of face is to be avoided at all costs’.

This is very similar to Harmer’s (1995) observations: ‘Traditionally Cambodian society has emphasised preservation of the status quo, a tolerance of suffering and injustice and a conformity to higher authority’. In setting out the impact of war and trauma on individuals and families, Harmer offers helpful observations that explain behaviour which may otherwise be inexplicable to those who have not suffered the extremes of experience to which many Cambodians were subjected. She has listed the behaviours associated with post-traumatic stress disorder which are now commonplace in Cambodia: ‘... particularly mistrust, fear and the breakdown of social relationships. ...Symptoms of learning and concentration problems, memory loss, disorientation in space and time, sleeping problems, depression, apathy, aggression and violent behaviour are normal reactions to the extremely abnormal circumstances of trauma’.

It is important to note that such symptoms may take a long time to appear once the trauma is over. Various studies indicate that abnormally high numbers of people in Cambodia are suffering from some of these symptoms, such as sleep disorders, which does not mean that these people are mentally ill – many present as functioning very well. Nevertheless, it cannot be known how much impact the symptoms have on an individual’s capacity and it is probable that

many people are functioning at a less than optimal level.

Harmer observes that once someone has developed ‘survivor behaviours’ in times of extreme danger and repression, it may be impossible to unlearn them. Self-protection and the security of one’s family therefore become predominant motivators of behaviour which continue long after the danger has passed. Emotional intelligence theory has brought an understanding that human responses are triggered by emotional memory rather than by rational, discursive thought, which offers further insights into the responses and behaviours of people who have suffered extreme trauma. To summarise, as noted by Hauff in a presentation paper ‘The Psychological consequences of massive destruction of a society: Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge’¹ ‘Thus the Pol Pot era is not a “closed chapter” in Cambodian history.’

While none of the above studies were specifically concerned with multi-cultural organisations, their findings are relevant for the purpose of this paper. These authors noted both traditional beliefs and post-war behaviours which Cambodians demonstrate repeatedly as individuals and in their relationships within families and communities. It is therefore a matter of course that those beliefs and behaviours are brought into organisations and affect how people function as employees and within organisational relationships. There is a possibility that some Cambodians view the influx of expatriates as another invasion and occupying force to be survived, and if so, it may be that expatriates are unwittingly provoking the very behaviours they find frustrating. The challenges for expatriates to understand the culture of their Cambodian colleagues are therefore multiplied many-fold by the need to try to recognise and understand the legacy of war and trauma.

¹ Hauff, E.: Paper presented at the Congress of European Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, Istanbul June 1999.

Diversity and Cognitive Structures

Any organisation anywhere in the development sector will encompass many dimensions of diversity in its staff group: age, gender, race and ethnicity, management – professional/programme – support staff, to name only the more obvious. Depending on its structure, there may also be diversity arising from geographic location such as a head office and provincial offices. In the context under consideration here, the Cambodian–expatriate dimension must also be added. When rich and diverse mixtures come together all manner of positive things can ensue. As Hursey² quotes in a paper on creativity and innovation: ‘...creative ideas that were produced by culturally heterogeneous groups were of better quality and more feasible than those produced by culturally homogeneous groups (McLeod, 1996)’. While on the negative side, Hofstede (1980) documented the: ‘...*unintended conflicts* (author’s emphasis) which often arise during intercultural encounters and which happen although nobody wants them and all suffer from them’.

Thomas, one of the world’s leading diversity experts, proposed the following definition of diversity: ‘any combination of individuals who are different in some ways and similar in others.’ (Thomas, 1999) Every individual may be placed within the broad dimensions of diversity as male/ female, young/old etc. – and an organisation’s diversity mix may be defined by grouping people together in any particular combination of those dimensions. This Thomas refers to as ‘attribute diversity’. He notes that a key dynamic of diversity in action is that ‘Different components of a diversity mixture have different perspectives.’ Defining different perspectives and thus what Thomas refers to as ‘behaviour diversity’ is less easy because of the inescapable fact that every

individual’s own set of life experiences have uniquely shaped their perception of reality, and consequently, how they behave in any given situation, which leads into the realms of psychology. Every individual builds his/her set of cognitive structures on the socialisation and teachings that he or she experienced from the day they were born (many of which are culture-specific). It is human nature, when faced with a new situation which requires innovation, to revert instead to known patterns of response and react with behaviour as if in a known situation.

Whether or not someone can ever hope to understand deeply what is behind the reactions, responses and behaviours of someone from an entirely different culture must be open to debate. Organisational culture is a deep and complex subject, even when all members of the organisation originate from the same society or ethnic grouping. When people from multiple cultures are working side by side those complexities are multiplied significantly.

Multi-Cultural Organisations in Cambodia

The history of the development sector in Cambodia has many defining characteristics, one of which is the type of relationship which has grown up between Cambodians and the expatriates with whom they work. It is not unusual to find that:

- Expatriates hold the significant senior leadership positions, giving them control of resources which inevitably also gives them the vast majority of power in the organisation. This power structure reflects the predominant social construct of patron–client relationships, with which many Cambodians are comfortable because of its familiarity.

² Hursey, C.: Draft. ‘Creativity and Innovation: Puzzles for Capacity Building’, INTRAC, forthcoming.

- Within this relative structural positioning, many Cambodians demonstrate what appears to be dependence on expatriates for decision-making and other essential aspects of management, sometimes to dysfunctional levels. In particular, there is anxiety about dealing with other expatriates, especially donors. This dependence can seriously hinder the process of building confidence and capacity to take over important organisational roles and functions.
- Expatriates' expertise is held by both Cambodians and expatriates alike to be superior to that of Cambodians on most issues. While there may be valid reasons why expatriates are deferred to on technical matters, it is also a fact that often both groups attribute insufficient value to indigenous knowledge. Senior Cambodians are often hurt and frustrated by their compatriots' disinclination to listen to them if an expatriate source of advice is available.
- Expatriates are often ambivalent about what the transfer of power and responsibility to national staff really means. This manifests itself in slow progress towards effecting transfer. While it is recognised that Cambodians have developed many skills there are still, in many organisations, substantive questions about the capacity of Cambodians to step into leadership roles.
- On the surface there appear to have been long-term and extensive efforts to build the capacity of Cambodians, yet this has infrequently resulted in Cambodians acquiring the expected level of knowledge and skills. Expatriates tend to be hired for their technical ability rather than their

ability to transfer skills and build capacity. As a result, there are many situations where expatriates continue to do tasks that could and should be done by Cambodians, often without a counterpart to work and learn alongside them.

A further complication is that even where an organisation does give time to these issues, there is constant change due to the turnover of expatriate staff. The overall impact of differences that arise as expatriate staff come and go is significant.

Perceptions of Change

Many of the challenges are exacerbated by the Cambodian attitude to change, itself a deeply rooted cultural belief. Hofstede (1987) noted that in South East Asian societies, tradition is a source of wisdom which leads to an inherent dislike and avoidance of change. The numerous and rapid changes now assailing Cambodia and her culture have not impacted significantly on traditional beliefs about change. It has been explained to the author that Cambodians view change as necessary only when something is failing. Thus admitting to the need for change is effectively to admit that you were doing something 'wrong' in the past – something no one is willing to do because it will result in loss of face. There is thus in place a powerful predisposition to see change as negative because it attracts negative consequences.

Development organisations seek to be effective as agents of change for the good of the people of Cambodia. Yet much in their own functioning contributes to upholding the status quo. That this problem is not unique to Cambodia is confirmed by Eade (1997): '...the structures and behaviour even of 'progressive' CBOs and NGOs often reflect and reproduce the inequalities existing in the societies of which they are a part – even when they consciously aim to eradicate these. ...Development agencies should likewise look critically at their own

structure and institutional cultures, and tackle the inequalities that may be implicit in these’.

Taking Responsibility

In Cambodian culture, there is little expectation of leaders taking responsibility, because responsibility, position and power are not seen to be linked in the same way as they are in some Western cultures. It can be observed in Cambodian public life that letting someone else take the blame in times of trouble is a mechanism for a powerful person to avoid the experience of losing face. Staff in turn will understand that this is one of their roles in the patron–client relationship. After a suitable time has elapsed, he or she will be restored to their former position, if in fact they ever left it.

More profoundly, the issue of taking responsibility is seen by some as being strongly linked to Buddhist beliefs about karma. It has been explained to the author by Cambodians that to take responsibility puts one in danger of being held accountable for something bad or negative. This is to be avoided because it could attract detrimental impact to one’s karma in the next life. Such beliefs and the related behaviours are poorly understood, if at all, by people who do not share these beliefs. Expatriates frequently express a great deal of frustration that Cambodians whom they judge to be very capable somehow fail to cross the invisible line into taking management responsibilities. Where Cambodians do decide to take responsibility, the style in which they do it is often at odds with what expatriates expect or judge to be acceptable, which yet again leads to frustrations on both sides.

The Iceberg: Beneath the Surface

Patterns of relationships and interaction are the tip of an iceberg within multi-cultural organisations. What lies below is a vast and complicated set of different cognitive

structures and belief systems. These structures and systems are much more powerful than anything that is visible and they therefore not only influence, but ultimately control, everything that happens within the organisation. Their existence is noted by Taylor³ as ‘...many forces that shape organisations that operate beyond the consciousness of those involved.’ And by Senge (2004) ‘...it is this invisible territory that is the most important when it comes to creating the conditions for high performance in teams, organisations, and larger institutional ecologies.’

Truly transformational change can only happen at this level – not at the surface level at which most interventions are targeted. Failure to grasp this is a root cause of much misunderstanding in development organisations, resulting ultimately in failure to achieve the desired impacts of programme delivery. Again, these problems are not unique to Cambodia. As Hursey (ibid.) commented: ‘Whilst the meeting of different cultures might appear to be at the heart of development, in fact the opportunities for benefiting from this exchange seem rarely mentioned.’

A final point in the exploration of why many problematic frustrations occur between Cambodians and expatriates (and between expatriates from different cultures) is that little, if any, time is taken to explore what everyone actually means by the different words and phrases that are the currency of daily communication within organisations. Equality may mean one thing to an expatriate and something very different to someone from a collectivist society in which the group always has primacy over the individual. How confusing is it for staff to work in an organisation where expatriate managers talk equality yet replicate all the traditional hierarchical structures of Cambodian society? What does

³ Taylor: ‘Organisations and Development Towards Building a Practice’, CDRA – not dated.

empowerment mean to those who have experienced very little personal power as opposed to those whose lives afford them the luxury of total self-determination? How empowered can a Cambodian feel working in an organisation where expatriates hold position, expert and resource power as a matter of course?

A recent paper by Malunga and James (2004) on organisational development practices in Africa notes: 'The failure of so many development interventions...can be partly attributed to their lack of rootedness in the society they were designed to change...For development interventions to catalyse fundamental change, they have to engage with people's identity and values...'

Although many organisations give attention to identifying and articulating their organisational values, in the NGO community generally there has long been a primary focus on skills transfer and capacity development as the mechanisms to bring about change. In terms of effecting sustainable change by empowering Cambodians to lead the process of social development in Cambodia this is, to use the iceberg analogy, akin to trying to dispose of an iceberg by chipping away at what can be seen above sea level, without realising that the bulk beneath exists and will rise constantly to the surface, maybe in different shapes, but rise it will and nothing will stop it. Ultimately, sustainable change can only be brought about by addressing organisational culture at its deepest level. The implications of this for international organisations working in development are profound because if they do not understand what is needed to bring about sustainable change within their own functioning and structures, they are probably even less able to bring lasting change to the external groups and communities with whom they work.

Further Questions

The analysis offered here prompts the asking of bigger questions:

- In international development organisations, whose beliefs and assumptions will prevail in the different stages and levels of culture formation? If one group imposes their beliefs and assumptions on others, what are the consequences for organisational integration and harmony?
- What is the impact on culture and organisational functioning if Cambodians ostensibly defer to and follow expatriates' beliefs and stated values, all the while quietly holding their own beliefs and assumptions untouched? And what happens when a Cambodian reaches a senior position and finds him or herself managing expatriates?
- What is the real impact of these cultural differences on the organisation's functioning?

Conclusions

There are many factors that contribute to the development of an organisation's culture and in a multi-cultural setting the complexities are extensive. Development practitioners, Cambodians and expatriates alike, are seeking to be change agents – yet, because of the complexities of the systems in which they work, few really understand the foundational basis for their practice, or the subconscious beliefs and assumptions that govern attitudes and behaviour. Neither are the beliefs and assumptions of the systems into which they intervene fully understood. This in itself raises ethical issues about the very nature of development practice which are rarely subject to open and honest debate. Organisational culture formation is unconscious, developing over time from the shared experiences of the

staff group without overt examination of what it is or what it means. Most development practitioners are ill equipped to know what will be the most effective change mechanisms for any particular context, because they have not taken time to explore and understand either their own culture and values or those of the organisations or groups into which they intervene.

Most challenging of all is that everyone, Cambodian and expatriate alike, is working from the basis of their own deeply held assumptions about the nature of reality, the world and how it works or should work. Very few of us give sufficient attention to recognising that others think, believe and feel differently to ourselves, sometimes so differently that nothing we have in our experience equips us to really understand each other at all.

Working to gain deep cultural understanding is time consuming anywhere and especially so in a multi-cultural organisation. The challenges and complexities of addressing these issues cannot be underestimated (nor can the importance of doing so and the dangers of not doing so). Unfortunately, few people or organisations recognise that the nature and quality of their organisational culture is fundamental to their integrity and success.

In order to bring about sustainable change in Cambodia it must be recognised that the challenges are not only about bringing new technical skills and resources but also about everyone understanding Cambodian culture and what happens within multi-cultural organisations. The starting point is working to understand the different deeply held beliefs of Cambodians and the expatriates who come to work with them. Without this understanding any change effected is likely to be superficial, unsustainable and probably a waste of time and resources – to the deep frustration of all concerned and to the detriment of Cambodia's poor.

Perhaps the most useful roles expatriates could take would be that of helping Cambodians to examine their own culture and analyse whether it has elements and attributes that are contributing to the country's problems. Equipping Cambodians to facilitate a process of deciding for themselves what in their culture is good and to be protected, what is unhelpful and how to change could be the most effective development intervention of all.

Leaders of multi-cultural organisations therefore carry a large, but mostly unacknowledged, responsibility to address the profound issues that arise from the very nature of their organisations. The ideal goal would be for each organisation to hold a set of beliefs which honour the Cambodian context in which it works while embracing what other cultures can offer to help overcome the country's many problems. Such an ideal is highly ambitious but if we do not believe it is ultimately achievable we must all question what we are doing.

Instead of hacking away at the visible part of the multi-cultural iceberg the time has come for the leaders of development organisations to pay serious attention to what really lies beneath the surface. Only if this is done will the sector stand a chance of achieving positive impact in the process of Cambodia's development by harnessing the power of multiple cultures instead of being repeatedly sunk by them.

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