

# Planning for the long term in Cambodia

by Bashir Sakhawarz

**Rehabilitating infrastructure after a long and brutal war takes as much patience as skill. Taking the time and making the effort to involve both the community and other NGOs who are already established in the area will result in long-term success.**

THERE ARE MANY ways in which an engineer can help society, but the best way is by helping the society to believe that they can and should help themselves. This is rarely easy and not always even possible, especially for people who have just come through a terrible disaster, such as a war. In many civil wars educated and skilled people are the first victims, and a society often loses its natural leaders. A sorry example is Afghanistan, where university lecturers, doctors, engineers, and intellectuals were put into prison immediately, because the new government thought that they were the major threat to its stability. Much the same thing happened in Cambodia, where education generally was denigrated because the Pol Pot regime thought that working in the rice fields was more important. Many skilled people died while working in the rice fields from lack of food, clean water, and health care; skilled people who resisted the government were even more unfortunate, as they were tortured and killed.

## Motivation

For people who have survived a long period of this kind of horror, education is a hazard. Because they have had to deny their education for so long, they are reluctant to admit to it now, and even more unwilling to admit that they actually want to improve their education or skills.

It was at the end of this era that, as a Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) engineer, I first encountered the Cambodian people. From the beginning I realized that there was a pervasive and complete lack of motivation, and that people were even less willing to participate in projects which aimed to help the society itself. Of course the wrong approach from some organizations who had tried to help before must share the blame for this state of affairs. Some of these organizations did not give the less-motivated Cambodians a chance to participate. Since motivating the people was time-con-

suming, and urgent measures needed to be taken, they decided to do the whole job themselves, supposedly making it easier for everybody but actually reinforcing the culture of non-participation.

After the first couple of months I realized that people were waiting to have everything done for them, and that I would have to really make an effort if I was to get people to contribute. Employing the local people instead of more skilled people from neighbouring countries seemed a risk worth taking, and it paid off. Although the work was sometimes slow because the people lacked skill, it progressed quickly on future projects. Once the people had completed a project successfully and were enjoying the benefits of it, their motivation levels



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*Employing local people and being patient while they learn new skills pays off in the end.*



*Providing information about health and hygiene was one of the NGOs' most important tasks.*

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became high and they started to initiate and run their own projects.

Engineers often go to work in a country like Cambodia and try to do all the engineering work themselves, without thinking that sharing the work with other organizations would help the country more in the long run. When I went to Cambodia I was responsible for designing the hospitals and for supervising the construction work of the water-supply system, including drainage, and sanitation. I knew that there was no way that I could do all this by myself, so to save money and make the projects run more successfully I decided to ask other NGOs to help us with our projects. Concern, an NGO with many years of experience working for the Cambodian refugees on the other side of the border, seemed to be a good choice for our sanitation projects, while Oxfam was invited to take charge of water-supply projects. These organizations were directly involved with the training of local engineers, who were participating in the development of their own country.

The water resources that we had to work with included wells (operated manually or with a pump), surface water, and rainwater. Wells are usually better options than artificial reservoirs, as the long rainy season usually ensures an adequate groundwater table.

Ponds are also commonly used as a source of drinking-water not only by the community, but also by animals, so they are often contaminated. Rain-water was an excellent source of drinking-water for private homes, but it was impractical for community projects such as hospitals and schools, because a large reservoir is needed.

## Related activities

The lack of information about both the technical aspects of water supply and the related health and hygiene issues meant that providing information was the NGOs' most important task.

UN soldiers were always willing to help in development projects in Cambodia, and their engineers are very well equipped. Their machinery was used to excavate and level the hospital compound, and the soldiers were happy to help provide the labour. The Dutch contingent of the UN forces participated in projects using their own money, which they had raised in games and raffles.

It is also the engineer's task in

development projects to supervise and train local engineers, so that progress is sustainable. In some developing countries engineers trained in management skills are rare, so although they may be qualified technically, they know little about the management side of the work. In Cambodia construction techniques were shifting from traditional methods to more modern ones, but the system that had to be used to implement the project was not, so it was easier to use the traditional methods. For instance it was quite common in Cambodia that nothing is put on paper: there were no reports or contracts, no bids or invoices, and no other documents required for building projects. MSF decided that it should provide not only relief, but also development, and that introducing legal procedures for its projects would be a start. The documentation of project activities was something new for the assistant engineers as well as for the contractors.

It is often the case in development work that funding for work is centralized, either because it is a direct

response to a recent disaster, or because one large international agency has chosen to finance a 'project'. But just because the funding is centralized does not mean the project's structure has to be. In the end we did manage to get a water supply system up and running in this part of Cambodia, but its chances of long-term sustainability are good not so much because of the hardware decisions that were taken (although they were important), but because of the structural decisions. The responsibility for key tasks was delegated to NGOs and local organizations who were already integrated into the community and employing and training local people, and who had long-term commitments to the communities. ●

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*Once the people completed a project and were enjoying its benefits, motivation levels grew.*