



Motivation and challenge: Working for international nongovernmental organizations in Cambodia

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Abstract

The factors that motivate Cambodians working for International Nonprofit Organizations (INGOs) were explored and compared to perceived challenges to their ability to be effective. It was based on interviews conducted with individuals working for INGOs in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh and the regional city of Battambang. For most, the primary motivations were not pragmatic, but about learning, having an impact, and making a difference. The external environment, rather than personal or organizational issues, brought the primary challenges. The balance between motivation and challenge among these “idealistic” individuals may be important in shaping their future commitments and impact on society.

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Introduction

International Nongovernmental Organizations (INGOs) have played important roles in the recovery from Cambodia's national trauma and in addressing issues associated with contemporary economic development. This article explores the factors that motivate Cambodians working for these organizations, in contrast to what challenges their ability to be effective. It is based on interviews conducted with individuals working in INGOs in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh and the regional city of Battambang. Because those interviewed are or are likely to be in leadership positions in their organizations, it also explores some implications for effective local-level leadership.

Literature Review

Cambodia has experienced a challenging and often turbulent history. Since about 2002, a heavy focus on

economic transformation has been joined to a state operating through neo-patrimonial institutions. In only a few years this transformation brought “profound social and political changes” (Hughes & Un, 2011, p. 5).

Humanitarian INGOs first appeared in 1989, followed soon by new or reorganized domestic NGOs. As of spring 2017, there were approximately 4,953 registered NGOs, INGOs and associations, although only about 1,350 were considered active (International Center for Not-For-Profit Law, 2017). INGOs, and NGOs, have contributed to reconstruction and development, including addressing negative economic change outcomes and promoting more effective public institutions (Norman, 2014). Their local impacts may be strengthening because of decentralization initiatives also begun in 2002 when commune governments were established (see for example, Neb, 2017).

INGOs generally do not have much direct influence on government strategy and policy. Moreover government authorities may view INGO advocacy, such as for human or civil rights, as oppositional, inviting controls or restrictions. At the same time, these recent changes have the potential to generate “deep transformation in the structure of local governance”, giving community-based organizations a

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crucial linking role between people and authorities (Sedara & Ojendal, 2007, p. 267).

The views of Cambodians working for INGOs are of particular interest because such people have been exposed to outside views while also interacting with community members, local organizations, and government officials. Their ideas about motivation and challenges are important because of their impact on communities organizing and expressing their interests and concerns.

Project Design and Methods

Our research on local level leadership in SE Asia has been evolving since 2008 (see for example, Pratt & Yongvanit, 2014, 2016). Here it is used to examine two critical factors for Cambodians working in INGOs: the motivations for their work and the challenges to doing it. What motivates and inspires, in contrast to what makes effective action difficult, can reveal a great deal about working in INGOs whose missions address critical social issues. The relationship between these two dimensions also has implications for current and future leadership.

Participants

This analysis was based on interviews with 19 Cambodians working for INGOs, 11 of which were in the capital of Phnom Penh and eight in the regional city of Battambang. Sixteen of the 19 were between the ages of 30 and 50, with nine over 40 but none older than 50. Just over half, 11 of the 19, were male. Everyone had at least a Bachelor's degree, and seven held a Master's. Many came from poor, often rural, families and childhood included supporting siblings. One interviewee, one of five children, lost his father when he was 6 years old. The lack of food meant each day was finding a way to survive. Other interviewees had been abandoned as children. One spent 10 years living in a temple and then was a monk for 7 years. Another obtained his formal education when he was an ordained monk. Their education brought offers from private companies, but they chose to work for INGOs.

Ten of the 19 held positions as directors in their organizations. Almost all spoke and wrote English since this was required to work in an international environment. The organizations they work for have a variety of missions and a range of international funders. In Phnom Penh most interviewees were in programs related to youth education and training, and to family and community development. Two of these provided housing and food for rural youth—that is, for children with backgrounds similar to those of many of the interviewees. Two worked in programs aimed at changing farmers' use of agrochemicals to more sustainable agriculture.

In Battambang, three were with INGOs addressing children's issues, with one developing savings programs for children. Two worked in "informal settlements"—one to help residents attain land titles and the other providing services to 200 youths in 17 settlements. One interviewee was engaged with sustainable forest management while another worked on empowerment for women. Another interviewee, although paid by an INGO, was on loan to the

municipal government to help increase its capacity and also improve INGO-government relations.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews took about one hour and with only a couple of exceptions were conducted by the authors. Those interviewed were located with the assistance of local colleagues knowledgeable about the INGO communities in both locations. A basic content analysis process was employed to report interview results. First, using interview notes reviewed by both researchers, the distinct points made by each respondent to the two questions were listed. Next, similar and overlapping points were grouped together. Then these clusters were given labels intended to reflect the similar and overlapping points making up the group. These clusters in turn created the broad themes discussed in the results. Interviewee statements are included for illustrative purposes.

Results

Motivation

The motivations that lead an individual to a job or a field of work can be a complex blend of the very pragmatic and the very idealistic. The make-up of the blend is consequential because it shapes expectations, determines levels of engagement and commitment, and affects the impact of organizational environment or job experience on the individual's future endeavors.

We asked interviewees to share what motivated them to undertake the work they do and, if there were different motivators, which were most important. Follow-up questions, when needed, rephrased this basic inquiry, such as by asking about the most important things pushing them to do their work in the organization and community.

As expected, there was a range of motivations. Pragmatism prevailed for some, but external factors were more important for most. A cluster of pragmatic motivations formed around the need to be employed (for example, *I needed a job when I graduated*), the desire to be recognized, using acquired education or skills, and the positive influence of a mentor or an award. In addition to being practical, these were heavily self-referential. Each was about something the interviewee wanted (for example, a job, recognition), was impacted by (for example, an encouraging person, an award) or hoped to make use of (for example, education, skills).

In contrast, for most interviewees the primary motivations were associated with something beyond their own needs and wants. The most frequently mentioned formed a cluster associated with learning, having an impact and making a difference (such as, *"I have to do this work"*). Fieldwork that exposed them to the villagers' real problems impacted them. Working with poor villagers and farmers became an "intrinsic reward" for several interviewees (for example, *"I love working in the village"*). Others were drawn to the openness of farmers and villagers who educated them about challenges they face. This in turn pushed interviewees to work that made a difference in the villagers'

lives (*“Working for the heart; not for money”*). One interviewee referred to having an impact on vulnerable women (*“To strengthen women’s capacity to ... stand up and express their voice”*) and another to helping youth who otherwise would have few opportunities.

The next most frequently mentioned cluster focused more broadly outward. One was helping the nation, society at large, the city, or their community (*“I love my city and want to develop my country in such a way that its economic and social benefits are fair”*). This reflects the mobilizing power of having a broader purpose and making a difference.

Another cluster of external motivations, less mission oriented, was being in an organization that has a good work setting, healthy relationships, and honest practices with no corruption. Comparisons with government agencies personally experienced or heard about were implicit for some and explicit for others. They were reported as not respecting employees, discouraging positive staff relationships, lacking needed relationships with communities, and betraying their mission by questionable practices.

Less mentioned than these drivers, but still more frequent than the pragmatic motivations, was a set reflecting the desire to use their experience of growing up poor to help people facing similar hardships. When asked why they choose to work with INGOs rather than as civil servants or for private firms, a number answered it was because of their childhood in which they had to help raise siblings, put aside their own education, and try to survive. They could see this was not just happening to them which in turn created a desire to be someone who helps others (*“I was suffering when I saw that others were suffering too”*). Some in Phnom Penh referenced “love” as a powerful force in what they do, a characterization that had not surfaced in interviews in other places. Responding to a question about this, one speculated it might be the result of the horror of the 1970s and 1980s, a way of getting passed it and having some hope while *“dealing with a wounded heart”*.

Challenges

The challenges perceived to limit their effectiveness fell into three broad groupings whose contents fit under the labels “Personal”, “Organizational” and “External Environment”. Personal, a somewhat smaller cluster, is about perceived individual shortcomings, risks or aspirations. The next largest group, Organizational, is composed of challenges associated with dynamics of the workplace. External Environment refers to challenges emanating from the community and institutional settings in which their work is done.

One interesting Personal challenge consisted of not being well organized, being too impatient in work, and balancing working hard to reach an outcome with realism about how long a project or task should take. Personal challenges also were found in maintaining health in the face of work-related stress and the associated risk of illness. Consistently displaying good behavior toward others was a Personal challenge. Interestingly, deciding how much power is desirable and when to seek more of it were seen as challenging tests of personal character. Finally building and

maintaining personal capacity in order to match newcomers’ education and, in their organization’s international environment, better English language skills, was a personal challenge.

The biggest cluster within Organizational challenges, the next largest grouping, was composed of differing dimensions of staff relations. This refers to low performing employees who cannot be expected or, alternatively, trusted to do their work; managing people who have differing personalities and motivations; coping with especially difficult staff and bosses; teams that require blending members who have different skill sets and priorities; the on-going need to find compromises where there are conflicting ideas; staff who do not trust or are jealous of one another; older staff who will not be managed by someone younger; and bosses afraid of more talented or younger staff.

A smaller cluster, also of Organizational challenges, focused on resources. One dimension was simple: finding the basic funding needed to continue the organization’s work, a problem some saw as increased by contemporary donors deciding to disperse their monies more widely across the community, NGOs, and the government for the purpose of getting broader buy-in for programs. The ever-present reality that inevitably more resources are required to have a greater impact was related to this.

The largest grouping of challenges, labeled External Environment, could be broken into four clusters that are roughly equal. The first was trying to work with farmers and villagers who have little formal education and do not understand the complexity of problems, and therefore the time needed to implement programs to address them. When these unrealistic expectations are not met they become frustrated. Associated with this was the difficulty of exchanging ideas with farmers and the necessity for INGO staff to be patient to be successful. Coming from a different direction was the challenge presented by volunteers and students who have little understanding of rural and village life and, as a consequence, are not able to implement programs as planned. This required getting to know the villagers and the community and then learning to work with them as a team, behaviors that can be especially difficult for older staff.

The second cluster in the External Environment challenges came from the different ways in which the government institutionally, as well as through specific individuals working for it, can create roadblocks for collaborative problem solving. One was when the government’s approach is simply to issue commands. This “command and control” approach makes it difficult for officials to understand an issue from the affected community’s point of view. It also forecloses on the information sharing and networking needed for the best solutions. In addition, there was the challenge presented by senior government officials who are older and less respectful and trusting of INGO staff, especially younger staff.

A third External Environment challenge was to effectiveness in addressing problems for which their educational background or training left them unprepared. This sense ranged from the broader problem of understanding too little about the “real-world” to not being knowledgeable

enough about the specifics of a community's problem, such as HIV infections. Related to this was the difficulty of building the right kind of image and relationships in the community and with the government. This required visibility and becoming well enough known to key government officials and community representatives. It also meant learning how to effectively express opinions and advocate policies across highly diverse settings that range from formal government offices to open-ended community gatherings.

Finally, there was the External Environment challenge of risk-taking. Having an impact on complex multilayered problems required taking risks, such as bending rules, committing scarce resources to a particular strategy for addressing a community problem, or strongly advocating a position in front of government officials. At the same time, the willingness to do these things increased the chances of blame and of consequences, perhaps severe, when things do not work out as hoped.

A Story of Motivation and Challenge

This section describes the interplay of motivation and challenge in the INGO experience of one Cambodian. "Vovaeun" (the name has been changed to protect identity) is in his mid-to-late 40s and currently the executive directive of a community development organization in an urban setting. One of the older interviewees, he has worked for different nongovernmental organizations for more than two decades and is well connected to donors and to government agencies and officials.

Vovaeun's motivation comes from his personal history. His family was desperately poor during his childhood prior to and during the Khmer Rouge period. Seeing his family's struggle for survival in the lives of others moved him to help them. Over the years that basic motivation broadened to incorporate building a better future for his country. His drive remains very strong, but years of experience have clarified the challenges. One is in the gulf between communities and government and the effort needed to join their very different ways of operating.

He believes villagers and farmers have given *him* an education. Even though they cannot read or write, they "*taught me to be respectful and patient.*" Government officials come to him to get things done because of his extensive connections with and support from communities. He in turn incorporates into work with officials the gestures of respect and patience he has been taught.

He has seen that when the government wants to take action, such as moving people into a new settlement, it tries to avoid resistance by ordering them to go to the designated area. He also has observed that few come when the government calls a meeting for "public input" about the program. When he calls the meeting, however, people attend, which in turn lets public officials look good in the media. This allows him to play an effective "middle man" role through which he negotiates forms of compensation for communities that otherwise would be unlikely.

He is aware of how challenging this role is, as well as the limits placed on his effectiveness. In reality he does not

have much power. He remains effective by *not* going face-to-face against the government. It is important to project an image of being neither government nor community to retain his influence. Being identified as either would risk not accomplishing anything. His strategy therefore is to talk to government officials on a human, person-to-person level about one specific, addressable, and perhaps negotiable, problem at a time.

Another challenge is building future community advocates. He strives to give promising individuals what they need to be effective. It is disappointing to him that many become the kind of leader he does not want to see—prideful, acting smarter than anyone else, not being independent, and participating in corruption. Some lack a strong enough commitment and neglect to acquire necessary knowledge and skills. Others, after trying and failing, just give up and turn away. He noted, for example, that *Being a leader means that you fail many times.*

Finally, there was the risk the work he is committed to will create real trouble for him. Because of that risk he positions himself behind community voices, not in front of them.

Discussion and Conclusion

This section addresses a number of issues that emerged from the interviews: the idealism of the interviewees; the challenge of negotiating differences in leading versus bossing, ability versus age, and knowledge versus seniority; the risks in trying to address the base causes of problems; and whether it is possible to be effective without participating in corruption.

The motivations these Cambodians described for their work were, on the whole, quite idealistic. They overwhelmingly claimed to be moved by non-pragmatic goals that do not serve personal needs or offer personal rewards. They aspired to have an impact and make a difference by improving the nation, society at large, their city, or their community. They wanted to be part of an interpersonally healthy and uncorrupted work environment. They also wanted to make certain that their experience of growing up poor and without hope was turned to the benefit of others.

This idealism could be interpreted by someone as showing either that their statements are not honest, or they are extremely naïve. These responses, however, are not very different from what people in "public service" organizations in other places describe as their strongest drivers. In the United States, for example, it is well known that staff idealism and mission-orientation is an important part of what makes non-profit organizations successful. These counterbalance the lower pay, job benefits, or employment security that nonprofits commonly offer in comparison to private firms or the government.

Consistent with this, a number of interviewees compared their INGO experience favorably with what they know about government employment. For example, one young woman with a Master's degree had worked for an INGO before recently deciding to transfer to a government agency. She made the change to gain better job security, that is, for pragmatic reasons. She soon realized that

working in a government agency is a very different experience. In the INGO good governance was advanced through leadership intended to facilitate the work of others. In comparison, the government agency has a traditional idea of “boss”, embodied in top-down communication and issuing commands. She has found this style of leadership difficult—“commanding” is not effective—and now struggles to reconcile contrasting organizational missions, environments, and leadership styles.

The challenges these interviewees experienced fell into three broad areas—Personal, Organizational, and External Environment. The most frequently mentioned were related to the external environment and were found in interactions with farmers and villagers, working with the government, having the right knowledge and skills and being recognized for them, and risk-taking.

Age was repeatedly identified as a challenge and it is noteworthy that the oldest interviewee was not more than 50. The reported absence of older staff in their organizations very likely is the result of a combination of factors. One is the genocide that took the lives of so many adults. Another is the urgency that surviving older and educated workers may have felt to find secure and higher paying jobs when they were able to return to the workforce.

For both these reasons, and perhaps others, in general the older staff with whom these interviewees worked did not have anything beyond the most basic education. It was not uncommon for them and other younger, university educated staff to be the bosses of older Cambodians. This does not accord with traditional Khmer culture, which values seniority. Their experience nonetheless, was that in this collision between respecting age and valuing education and knowledge, education in winning in their organizations, although not without conflict. This collision may also account for the strong distinction interviewees made between “boss” and “leader”, a boss being someone occupying a position because of age rather than effectiveness.

This inquiry about motivation and challenges did not, directly or indirectly, ask about corruption or matters related to it. Given its well-documented pervasiveness, it was inevitable to surface in interviews or in comments made afterward as a factor in the External Environment. Several observed that corruption is everywhere in the public and private spheres, comes from the top, and cannot be discussed publicly without great risk. For some, corruption seemed so interwoven into everyday activities that there was no point in talking about it. One respondent explained that she left a government position, which may have paid better and definitely provided better job security, to join a community organization because there was so much corruption in the former. An interviewee in Battambang noted that even when local officials were given more money and more resources, the illegal activities these were intended to replace continued. Another observed that projects involving INGOs and NGOs often start off responsibly, but after time has passed, money is drained off in “under the counter” kickbacks.

That this is a “normal” part of the environment for these idealistic and mission-driven individuals raises for them a challenge of what to do. One response was acknowledging corruption's current pervasiveness and accepting that to

survive means participating in it. Here pragmatism dictates taking care of yourself and your organization first. Another was to take the position, as one interviewee put it, that it depends on the leader—if the leader declares clearly there will be no participation in corruption, then there will be none. A third response is to look for opportunities to combat it, balancing benefit and risk. For example, one recounted proposing to someone higher in the organizational chain that a more transparent accounting system be put in place, and the proposal was accepted.

These choices reflected an on-going issue they face of whether it was possible to be successful in their work without engaging in corruption. More broadly this required addressing how the countervailing forces of motivation and challenge would affect their readiness to continue their work, and what that work would focus on. Asking aspirational and highly motivated people about challenges to their effectiveness is inevitably also a question about their ability and readiness to lead their organizations and their communities. Leadership involves both vision and risk. One respondent talked outside of the interview about the kind of work he sees INGOs doing these days. He saw more attention to children's issues and less on struggles over land, even though land issues are huge in the countryside. He believed the reason for this was that INGOs understand how high the stakes are over the control and use of land, and know involvement may get them into trouble. In contrast, funding can be obtained for children's issues with much less risk. Yet even for children's programs there are boundaries to be aware of. These are defined by whether a project explores what is causing the problems—such as poverty and displacement—rather than treating their effect on children.

The older interviewee who aspires to create the right kind of leaders out of younger Cambodians faces the challenge of getting them to have vision—to think in terms of issues and institutions that are beyond their immediate responsibilities. Younger Cambodians like those working in INGOs, in turn must be willing to take vision-inspired risks while remaining strategic enough to avoid putting themselves, their careers, or their organizations in jeopardy. Their motivation to make a difference will have to be stronger than the challenges that re-direct some of their colleagues to safer, although perhaps less satisfying, choices.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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