



International FORUM on Development Service
FORUM International du Volontariat pour le Développement

Cambodian NGOs' Perceptions of International Volunteer Agencies

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Prepared for the
IVCO conference 2008

International FORUM on Development Service

IVCO 2008

Day Two – Local Perspectives

Research Project: Cambodian NGO perceptions of international volunteer agencies by Elizabeth and Brian Ponter

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November 2008

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose

The purpose of the research was to explore host organizations' perspectives of international volunteer agencies. Research questions explored three topics: the NGO hosts; the NGO/IVCO (International Volunteer Co-operation Organisation) relationships and the international volunteers (IV) themselves.

Research methods

As little has been written on this topic the research was basically qualitative and exploratory in approach. A number of Cambodian and expatriate staff of NGOs hosting international volunteers were interviewed. FORUM executive members and University colleagues were also consulted. They contributed several areas of concern and the more relevant were integrated into the questionnaire of 57 qualitative and quantitative items that was pre-tested on six senior NGO staff. Two significant changes were made. The final questionnaire covered the following areas:

1. Personal information about respondents
2. NGO background
3. The relationship between NGOs and international volunteer agencies
4. How particular volunteer assignments are set up?

5. Experience of all international volunteer agencies
6. Host management of international volunteers
7. Cost of hosting international volunteers

Senior staff from 34 Cambodian NGOs were interviewed in Khmer by experienced Cambodian interviewers, most of whom were graduates. It was felt that they would get 'closer' to the Cambodian interviewees than a 'foreigner' would. A non-Cambodian interviewer would possibly have been identified closely linked to the donor or the international volunteer agency and would possibly trigger inhibitions. The maintenance of harmony is a major value in Cambodian society.

Another problem was not so easily addressed. Some of the subtleties of Western planning strategies are difficult to express in Khmer and some of the interviewers were not able to pursue these subtleties. The interviewers translated the interviews from Khmer to English. Having another person to translate, not the interviewer, would probably have resulted in other data being lost. The completed interview schedules and the translations were returned to us as soon as possible after the interviews, usually the same day, for checking and for any necessary elaboration. This sometimes involved a telephone call to the relevant NGO staff member.

Principle findings were:

1. **NGO accountability**, NGOs felt overwhelmingly accountable to their donors and agencies that provided them with international volunteers. Their clients were hardly mentioned.
2. **Which organisations, NGOs or IVCOs, take the initiative in establishing partnerships and setting up assignments?** IVCOs and other agencies are more likely to take the initiative in establishing partnerships; NGOs are more likely to take the initiative in developing assignments.
3. **Reasons why NGOs seek IVCO partners and issues discussed with them.** Partners were sought mainly for the skills volunteers brought including English language skills that were stressed. Discussions focussed mainly on volunteers, their recruitment, job descriptions, placement, performance and behaviour.
4. **IVCO dependence on NGOs.** Most NGOs did not recognise any dependence and were unaware that by the nature of their business IVCOs will be actively promoting opportunities for partnership. A lack of reciprocity was not an issue for the NGOs which tended to see themselves in a patron/client relationship.

5. **Positive and negative factors influencing NGO/IVCO relations.** Positive factors included satisfaction with volunteers, good personal relationships with IVCOs and clear procedures for NGO/IVCO relationships. Negative factors included issues around the appointment of IVs and complaints about individual IVs (International Volunteers).
6. **Understanding of codes of practice.** There was little understanding about these.
7. **Using IVs to best advantage.** NGOs should be clear about work required and be friendly towards volunteers.
8. **Advantages and disadvantages of hosting IVs.** Key advantages were staff capacity development; improvement of spoken and written English, technical support and raising funds and raising the profile of NGOs. Few disadvantages were noted, those that were, were related to IV appointments and contracts and complaints regarding individual IVs.

Some implications

Staff of the Cambodian NGOs interviewed generally held very favourable views of the IVCOs they worked with but there was possibly a reluctance to express negative opinions as NGO staff would not wish to lose favour with the IVCOs they enjoyed a partnership with. Mutual dependence between NGOs and IVCOs was not widely recognised by NGOs.

The most satisfied NGOs were those that had the greatest input into the selection of IVs. With such ownerships the placements are more likely to be successful. Those IVCOs that do not involve the NGOs in selection to any extent may find it beneficial to consider greater NGO involvement.

While IVCOs will be concerned to uphold their own objectives when placing IVs these may not always coincide with the plans of the NGOs. There should be room for some flexibility.

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Acknowledgement

FORUM and VSA would like to acknowledge and thank Irish Aid, NZAID and the Royal University of Phnom Penh for supporting this research.