



FINAL NARRATIVE REPORT

Grant No. DCI-ASIE/20 1 2/276 – 656: The Increasing Access to Public Information (IAPI) Project, January 2013-December 2015

BY: ADVOCACY AND POLICY INSTITUTE

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

ARTICLE 19, CAMBODIAN ORGANISATION FOR WOMEN SUPPORT (COWS),
FISHERY ACTION COALITIONS TEAM (FACT), KHMER BUDDHIST SOCIETY IN CAMBODIA (KBSC), MLUP
BAITONG (MB), AND VILLAGE SUPPORT GROUP (VSG)

February 2016



1. Description

- 1.1 Name of Beneficiary of the grant contract: Advocacy and Policy Institute (API).
- 1.2 Name and title of the Contact person: Mr. Sinthay Neb, API Director.
- 1.3 Name of partners in the Action: Advocacy and Policy Institute (API), Article 19, Cambodian Organisation For Women Support (COWS), Fishery Action Coalitions Team (FACT), Khmer Buddhist Society In Cambodia (KBSC), Mlup Baitong (MB), and Village Support Group (VSG).
- 1.4 Title of the Action: Increasing Access to Public Information 2013-2015.
- 1.5 Contract number: DCI-ASIE/2012/276-656.
- 1.6 Start date and end date of the Action: 1 January 2013– 31 Dec 2015.
- 1.7 Target country (ies) or region (s): Cambodia.
- 1.8 Final Beneficiaries &/or target group: All of the residents living in the target 49 communes, covering 600 villages - approximately 573,914 people. Young people, women/mothers, fishermen, farmers, elderly people, people with disabilities, and members of CBOs in target areas.
- 1.9 Country(ies) in which the activities take place (if different from 1.7): Cambodia

2.1 Executive summary of the Action

This report intends to highlight the results achieved during 2013-2015 and share some of development and management lessons learnt. The report is developed by API with inputs from all partners as well as main findings from project end-line survey and project final evaluation report that was conducted in December 2015.

Looking back, IAPI project has achieved considerable tangible results which; as rated overall as the successful project according to the project final evaluation report¹; contributed the strengthening of good local governance practices in Cambodia. Designed in 2013, in support of the demand-side of local governance, IAPI has strategically used commune councils, the lowest level of government, as its entry-point.

Three years after its inception, the project helped local voices and citizen's concerns to be raised loudly and better responded by relevant tiers of sub-national councils and their administrations. Accountability mechanisms and individual capacities were developed to facilitate dialogues and interactions between citizens, communities, councils and administrations. As described in the following pages, district fora, other information disclosure platforms and media have helped solved local problems impacting life of villagers. The project contributed to democratization and welfare of the people through creating transparency and awareness on the benefits of A2I leading to more dialogues between citizens and the government including other service providers². This created greater impacts of increased participation of local people, better understanding of access to public information issues by councils and government officials at district and commune level.

Local people in the target communes and villages became aware of their rights to access public information and the ways to demand and get this information. District and Commune Councils and government officials and clerks in target districts and communes improved their awareness of the importance of access to information and of their capacity to supply the people with public information. The dialogue between the people and councils/government improved significantly. The people are braver to approach government officials and to demand information than before. Government officials are less reluctant to communicate and to supply the people with requested information. Hundreds of local CSO's were involved in this project. The people interviewed by the evaluation team reported that CBO's and NGO's in their areas were instrumental to improve their lives through information and practical support during this project.

1 IAPI Final Evaluation conducted in December 2015

2 Provincial Technical Departments of Sector Ministries, CSOs, Local Contractors/Private Sectors etc.

Equally important, the people and local governments and administrations were largely unaware of the importance of access to information for democratic development in the beginning of project implementation. A certain mistrust and scepticism regarding the activities and objectives of IAPI in the beginning of implementation was reported. Advocacy was an alien and sensitive term and not well understood by the beneficiaries. The project successfully addressed this scepticism and significantly increased the awareness of all beneficiaries through a series of project-established voices and accountability processes that allow all of them to bring such challenge to light. Through the signing of MoU's with all 10 District/Municipality and 49 Commune/Sangkat Councils in the beginning of the project and additional communication with the Mol the support from government side was secured throughout the project.

Source: Project Final Evaluation, December 2015

Despite these results and the impact at central and local levels, many challenges are still ahead, in terms of accountability, access to information and citizens' participation in local development. The number of elected female councilors is not only presented in small proportion compared to those male but also they lack of advocacy and leadership skills to influence local decision-makings. Political discrimination between the ruling and opposition parties remain existed leading to counter-productive in making-decision process. Some community activists have been often involved in local council meeting³, however, they are less influential in raising and arguing their critical issues. Councils themselves have limited mandate and capacity to address increased needs and demands of local people (beyond their capacity). In this regards, they still need to be strengthened in order to advocate with higher authorities to address critical issues (e.g. land, forest, fishery etc) being encountered by their constituencies.

In 2015, the project was proud to be associated with the Ministry of Information-led TWG, UN Agencies and other CSO networks in drafting Cambodia's A2I Law, the only first law that is highly demanded by the public, communities and civil society organizations to be inclusive in the light of identifying Information needs to be incorporated into the draft law towards adoption and enforcement after 2017. 37 CSOs/networks have been grouped as one broader A2I working group that includes international organizations, interest groups and NGO's, which is commenting the draft law on a regular basis. Since then, API⁴ has also established a team of seven legal experts to provide ongoing technical and capacity building support to CSO A2I WG better define CSOs' mandate and position itself in the drafting of this important law. As reported in project final evaluation, and by many development partners, API is now a recognized and trusted organization dedicating great effort for A2I law as well as promoting governance practices, particularly open information at the grassroots.

Although the dialogue on the draft A2I Law took place mainly at national level, this component of the IAPI 2013 – 2015 can also be characterized as generally successful. Partly because of the IAPI project the issue of drafting an A2I Law seems to have overcome future challenge of misunderstanding, unawareness and political unwillingness to include public feedbacks and thoughts as well as inputs of CSOs in final draft of the law once the final draft will be passed by A2I TWG to Inter-Ministerial Committee for final say before moving to the council of ministers and national assembly for adoption. It should be noted that CSOs and UN agencies have no role at the inter-ministerial committee.

³ Based on the internal rule of local councils adopted at the time they took office, monthly meeting is conducted to provide overall guidance to the board of governor and to make decisions on issues that make positive effect the livelihoods of citizens, especially women, old people, people with disability and vulnerable communities.

⁴ API represents 37 CSOs/networks in A2I TWG bringing public thoughts, opinions and inputs of CSOs for the debate of draft articles (34 articles/9 chapters), which is happened every two months.

Partner organizations, through voice and accountability mechanisms established by project; worked actively to understand the concerns and critical needs of villagers and community organizations and able to strengthen horizontal and vertical cooperation within sub-national council networks. Thousands of meetings of the villagers reportedly took place in the 600 target villages during the project; advocacy and facilitation skills of hundreds of CBO's were built to have a stronger voice through direct involvement in a series of village meeting, community (commune) forums, district forums, local councils meeting and provincial partnership meeting⁵. At the project closing meeting held in December 2015, all project stakeholders confirmed that "multi-stakeholder dialogue" at provincial level is effective that can exchange experiences, ideas and expertise to solve problems, and for the strengthening of an democratic enabling environment that supported voices to be raised at local level but also partnerships to be developed within sub-national council networks.

A significant amount of Information, IEC materials was distributed among the final beneficiaries and local government's administrations. 260,776 IEC units were produced according to available monitoring information. This exceeds the planned amount of 196,079 brochures, booklets and other IEC materials for the project activities significantly. The project produced information displays and banners to publicly share important information at local administrations. Improvements could be achieved through more simplified and visual information materials. Partly the people are not familiar with reading complex IEC materials.

Major findings of Project Final Evaluation confirmed that the IAPI generally increased the capacity of all beneficiary groups in regard to A2I. The people are aware of their rights and know how and where to demand information. They also learned to make good use of their CSO's to facilitate the A2I and to obtain specific help. The councils, government officials and clerks have a better understanding of their roles, responsibilities and duties and the importance of access to information for the success of SNDD and are less reluctant to provide A2I than before. It has been reported that there is more clarity and commitment from the information supply side. Filing systems and information availability at local councils and administrations have improved through the increased capacity exceeding anticipated outcomes.

The project achieved all anticipated outcomes. The outputs were produced in time. All interlocutors interviewed mentioned the open and good communication with API during project implementation. Several reasons for the successful implementation of this project can be identified:

- The project targeted a real issue for the development of Cambodia in line with national development policies (NP-SNDD 2010-2019);
- The project was designed and implemented creatively. The reporting consisted of regular semester "narrative reports" and "financial reports". This reporting has proven to be sufficient for the implementation of the project and effective;
- The API formed a committed implementing team guided by a Project Steering Committee and maintained an open and good communication with all stakeholders throughout the action;
- The API provided capacity building and training for all partner organizations and new staff ensuring a smooth implementation and harmonization of the team;
- The project steering, management and decision making were organized in an effective and efficient way by API and its partner organizations with regular quarterly meetings and annual project partnership meetings (grant application) / annual project steering meetings as well as feedback mechanisms from the stakeholders. The meetings were well recorded with clear decisions and actions to be taken.

The local levels were included in the A2I Law component through the collection of supporting thumbprints of the villagers for a petition in the beginning of the project and some limited information and training measures. The

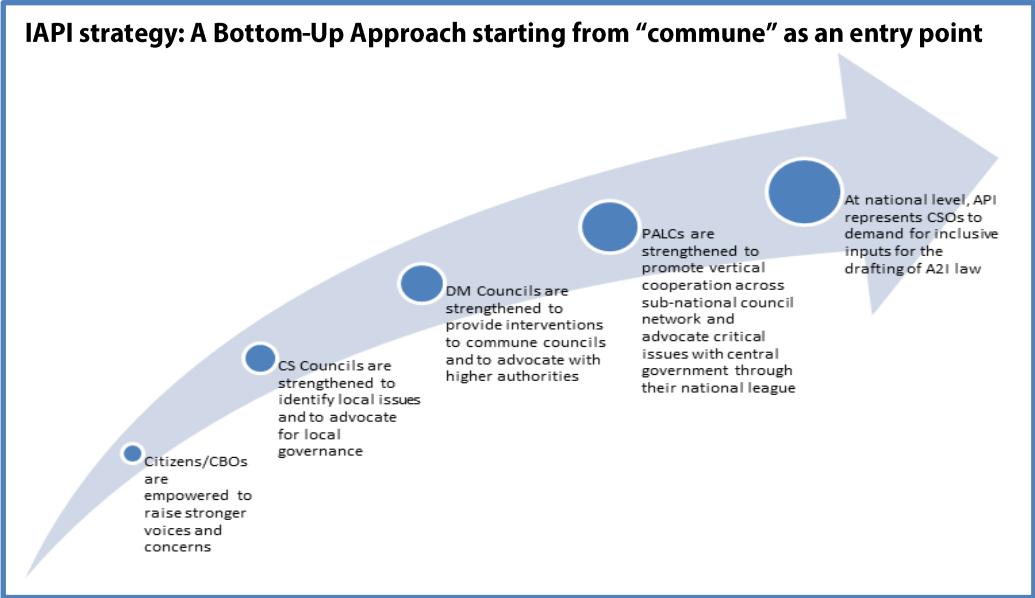
⁵ Provincial Partnership Meeting, deemed as multi-stakeholders dialogue, was conducted once a year, participated by all concerned sub-national councils, boards of governors, provincial line departments of sector ministries and NGOs and representatives of affected communities. This platform is to review critical issues of local people and agree on roles of relevant institutions/agencies to provide appropriate interventions and responses.

local administrations, however, received a comprehensive compilation and brochures with relevant regulatory documents

Response mechanism was established by the project. Actually, the project held 36 provincial partnership meetings for local authorities and other stakeholders to share successful cases and experiences on A2I as part of strengthening citizen engagement and empowerment. All local actors acknowledged that local authorities have played and continue to play role responsibly in coordinating with service providers in order to respond to citizens. The partnership concluded that there are some challenges to exist such as 1). Weak collaboration between local authorities and provincial departments of line-ministries for the delivery of services, 2). Low engagement of citizens and communities in some districts/communes, 3). Weak capacity of local councils to further advocate higher authorities to address stiff challenges being faced by local councils and citizens, 4) information disclosure mechanisms are working with support from CSOs.

Interestingly, Mr. Un Bunhan, an acting chief of Santuk district council in Kampong Thom province said that “local authority is the back of citizens, and that information really makes them brave enough to find solutions for their problems from local authority”. He also added “openness can help build accountability relationship between local authority and communities and reduce conflicts”.

Mutual learning” between local councils in the target provinces is of crucial importance. 16 exchange visits were organized for new and old councillors at district/commune level in Kampong Chhnang, Kampong Speu, Kampong Thom, Bantey Meanchey and Kratie to share experiences on role model of local authorities in development management, and citizen engagement and empowerment. By the end of the visits, most councillors understood clearly that they have high accountability (from the legal and practical perspective) to their constituencies for the delivery of quality services and recognised the participation of citizens in local decision-makings will need to be increased in order to building accountability relationships between local authorities, citizens/community organisations and civil society.



2.2 Results and Activities

Project Overall Objective: Contribute to poverty reduction and equity among vulnerable groups through improved governance at sub-national level.
Target Indicator 1 Achievement by 2015: Sub-national government strengthened in contributing to reduce poverty rate in target district significantly.