



Annual Impact Assessment Report 2020

Capacity Development and the Pandemic: The Challenges for Organisations and VBANK Responsiveness

Contents

1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. OBJECTIVES	2
3. COVID-19 IMPACT ON CAMBODIA IN 2020	3
4. METHODOLOGY AND FOCUS OF INQUIRIES	5
4.1 Design	5
4.2 Participating projects	5
4.3 Participating organisations	7
5. FINDINGS	7
5.1 Results of VBNK capacity development support	7
5.2 Partners' challenges and resulting adaptation in relation to COVID-19	11
5.3 Lessons learned by partners through responding to the challenges	12
5.4 Partners' assessment of VBNK responsiveness	14
5.5 Further support needed if COVID-19 continues	15
6. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS	16
6.1 Analysis	16
6.2 Conclusions	18
List of abbreviations	20
Annex: Key criteria and over-arching questions	21

1. Introduction

Capacity development is the process through which individuals, organisations and societies obtain, strengthen and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2009). Capacity development is critical to making a sustainable contribution towards addressing development challenges in Cambodia. It helps to build and improve the knowledge base of development actors and supports ongoing learning through regular monitoring and evaluation of interventions.

Unlike programmes supporting health and livelihoods, for example, capacity development does not have stand-alone outcomes. Instead, it supports a diverse set of goals across different sectors, at different levels, through a range of different activities. Consequently, capacity development can present multiple monitoring and evaluation (M&E) opportunities and challenges for practitioners. This annual impact assessment (AIA) will help VBNK to establish the causal links between particular capacity development activities that we have implemented, improvements in organisational performance, and the ability of organisations to change and be responsive to the needs of their stakeholders through their programmes and activities when facing multiple challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

VBNK has over 20 years' experience of working in the social and capacity development sector. In its newly developed Strategic Plan (2021 – 2024), VBNK sets out how it intends to continue its contribution to developing the capacity of organisations and actors involved in social development in Cambodia. The plan both consolidates existing practices and, recognizing the need to stay relevant, identifies new initiatives that are needed to keep civil society organisations effective and sustainable in the rapidly changing context of Cambodia's overall development. The Strategic Plan was developed before the full impact of the pandemic on Cambodia was known, but the unfolding situation has highlighted the need for all organisations to be creative and responsive if they are to continue their work with any degree of success.

VBNK uses sophisticated, tailored and innovative methods that are designed to unleash the potential of those with whom the organisation works. VBNK supports those processes based on our learning combined with deep understanding of the value and importance of non-governmental organisations' (NGOs) roles in making and measuring change in their respective sectors. Our experience enables us to support the capacity development of local partner organisations to improve their knowledge, skills and confidence to endure in the ever-changing development aid environment in Cambodia; through enabling them to analyse trends and formulate responses that will assist them to adapt and become more sustainable in the longer term.

VBNK's capacity development strategy has four strategic focus areas, which are not presented in any order of priority, because they are all important in different degrees according to the organisation in question and its circumstances at any given time. The focus areas are:

- Leadership and Governance;
- Creative Development Solutions;
- Organisational Development; and,
- Participation and Empowerment.

The programme framework highlights VBNK's accompaniment approach of working with and supporting organisations over a period of time, offering a range of interventions and activities that enable them to develop and strengthen their capacities.

The results from this AIA will guide our activities and strategies to improve and adapt the way we work with our partners, to ensure we are consistently responding to their evolving needs and requirements. The AIA results will be shared with external stakeholders to further confirm and demonstrate that VBNK's unique way of working is leading to beneficial and sustainable impact and change for the constituents we serve.

2. Objectives

The main purpose of the 2020 AIA was to gain an understanding of how COVID-19 had impacted on partners' work during the past year, to explore how they had been able to adapt during the COVID-19 outbreak and how the support given by VBNK had helped them manage their change processes. Through qualitative inquiry, we probed what they had learned about change and change management as a result of finding themselves in this situation. We also assessed how flexible and responsive we were in supporting partners, and how useful our own interventions had been during that time. The results from the AIA will inform the effectiveness of the methods VBNK utilised, and the adaptations we were able to make to support the capacity development of related stakeholders during the COVID-19 outbreak. As part of the continuous learning that happens within the organisation, the findings from the AIA will also support us to adapt our methodologies to ensure our responsiveness to partners' needs if the pandemic persists throughout 2021.

The AIA interviews looked for evidence of change resulting from the implementation of VBNK's programme strategies, with a specific focus for 2020 being on VBNK's role in supporting partner organisations to better utilise social media or information and communications technology (ICT) in their responses to the impact of COVID-19 on their work. This enabled us to both explore the impact of our coaching and assess how VBNK has been able to adapt and respond to partners' needs arising from COVID-19 conditions in Cambodia.

The data collection and analysis also sought to identify:

- How the partner NGOs and trade unions coped with and addressed the issues related to the COVID-19 conditions. What management and implementation challenges did they

face because of the changes? Whether or not VBNK was flexible in ways that were supportive of them making the necessary adjustments to their working practices.

- How, during the COVID-19 situation, the NGO partners have been able to adapt and utilize the knowledge, skills and tools provided by VBNK to address any emerging issues and challenges. Have they needed to make any changes to the overall approach to their work as a result of COVID-19, and if so, what have those changes been?
- Have the NGOs been able to use social media effectively and use ICT to adapt and respond to their organisation's objectives and needs, especially during the COVID-19 period? If not, what challenges have they faced?

3. COVID-19 impact on Cambodia in 2020

The first imported case of COVID-19 in Cambodia was detected in January 2020, and although a number of imported cases and transmission to direct contacts were confirmed throughout 2020, no significant community transmissions were detected until November 29th when a woman in Phnom Penh with no history of overseas travel tested positive with the virus. Contact tracing efforts across the city and in three other provinces, along with targeted testing, helped to quickly contain that outbreak. As of the second week of February 2021, Cambodia was considered to be managing the COVID-19 pandemic well. Until then there had been a total of 466 registered cases, with 443 recoveries and no deaths. Quick responses and the introduction of public health measures, including border controls and mandatory testing and quarantine for incoming passengers was attributed to the country's successful management of the virus. However, a large-scale outbreak detected on the 20th of February 2021 has since derailed the successes achieved in containment of the virus throughout 2020, with the first COVID-19 related death being reported on March 11th, 2021.

At different points during 2020, the government imposed a number of restrictions on the population, including long closures of multiple facilities and limiting the numbers of people who could meet in one place at any time. In March 2020 the Thai government closed all major border checkpoints with Cambodia, causing around 40,000 Cambodian migrant workers to rush back to the country for fear of being stranded in Thailand indefinitely. At the same time, Cambodia established its National Response Committee and introduced restrictions on arrivals to the country, alongside closing educational institutions, garment factories and entertainment and leisure venues across the country. Major public holidays, including Khmer New Year, were cancelled and a law to manage the emergency was adopted (but not enacted until 2021).

Internally, periodic travel restrictions and social distancing requirements made travel between the provinces difficult, and many of the provincial communities restricted visitors from outside of their province – especially from Phnom Penh, where most of the early imported cases had been found. Although most of the 6-month long restrictions had been lifted by September 2020, with the first community outbreak in November, a strict 14-day quarantine was imposed on all

arrivals regardless of a negative test, and major restrictions on gatherings were enacted with educational institutions once again being ordered to close for the remainder of the 2020 school year. By the middle of December, with the first community outbreak still unresolved, all unnecessary gathering and meetings were ordered to be cancelled. The restrictions, and fear caused within the communities, had an enormous impact on NGOs' ability to deliver their projects in their target areas during 2020, with many ultimately having to cancel planned activities or attempt to deliver them online.

The global shock triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted Cambodia's economy in 2020 at a time when Cambodia also faced the partial suspension of preferential access to the EU market under the "Everything but Arms" initiative. The UNDP predicted in October 2020 that the poverty rate in Cambodia could double to 17.6% and that unemployment will continue to rise as a result of the pandemic related recession. Following years of economic growth, the economy was projected to register -2% growth in 2020, the sharpest decline in Cambodia's recent history. [Cambodia Overview \(worldbank.org\)](https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/cambodia/overview) An estimated 390,000 lost their jobs in the main garment and tourism industries, and over 120,000 migrant workers returned from Thailand with no hope of gaining jobs in country. As a result, social protection measures threaten to be sorely tested during 2021. [The Shadow Pandemic of Migration in Cambodia - JURIST - Commentary - Legal News & Commentary](#)

During April 2020, as the first reports of COVID-19 began to emerge in Cambodia, the Cooperation Committee Cambodia (CCC), a membership organisation of NGOs, conducted a rapid survey to explore the extent of the impact that the pandemic might have on their members and related stakeholders, including development partners and government ministries. They aimed to utilise the results from the survey to inform their support of the organisations during the pandemic. 154 people responded to the survey, and over half of them predicted that their organisations and programmes would be severely impacted as a result of the emerging situation. They foresaw challenges with staffing, funding, ICT – including poor internet connections, and problems with the delivery of programme activities because of restrictions on travel and meeting with groups of people. At that point, no cases had been recorded outside of the capital city, so provincial towns and communities were fearful of people coming into their communities and potentially spreading the virus.

The majority of the CCC survey respondents had promoted health and safety guidance among their staff and target groups which included wearing masks, washing hands regularly and social distancing, and all discussed allowing staff to work flexibly from home. Most of the survey participants discussed how important it would be to keep donors and other relevant stakeholders regularly informed of the changing situation as this would probably require revising plans and budgets to adapt to the changes. They requested that donors be flexible and responsive and support them to find alternative options and solutions to meet the changing needs of their

beneficiary groups. This included the possible need to extend project timelines as activities would probably need to be postponed and rescheduled.

The respondents also foresaw the impact that COVID-19 might have on the people within their communities and target areas including unemployment, increased conflict and domestic violence and increased debt and poverty. They asked donors to consider flexibility in how they might target their funds in response to those changes and to think about how they could address some of the livelihood issues together.

4. Methodology and focus of inquiries

4.1 Design

This year, because of the ongoing COVID-19 situation, the AIA interviews were conducted during January 2021 and were specifically designed to gather more qualitative information from a smaller group of relevant partner NGOs and trade unions with whom VBNK worked during 2020.

Data collection was undertaken through key informant interviews (KIIs) with individual partners or small focus group discussions (FGDs), either on a face-to-face basis or via online platforms, dependent on the COVID-19 situation at the time. The process of data collection with the participating NGOs and unions was flexible and consultative. This thematic method supported the analysis and interpretation of the data for writing the report. In addition to getting answers to the inquiry questions (see Annex 1), VBNK endeavoured to collect stories of change and success from among those selected to be interviewed. At the end of each data collection interview, the VBNK staff member provided a summary reflection of the process and results, as well seeking clarity and explanations if any of the data appeared to be inconsistent.

The data collection tools were developed to reflect the work VBNK had done with the partner NGOs and trade unions in 2020, how they had been able to utilise VBNK's support during that time, and to what extent COVID-19 had impacted on their work. (See 'Key criteria and overarching questions' in the Annex.)

4.2 Participating projects

For the 2020 AIA, VBNK focused on the partners in the three projects listed below, and selected only 12 organisations from whom to obtain feedback, so that we could gain deeper qualitative information to provide stronger insights on how COVID-19 had impacted their work and how they had been able to respond.

- **Outcome and Impact Orientation Project**

VBNK has been commissioned by Bread for the World (BftW) to work with their Cambodian partners to support them to develop or strengthen the impact and outcome orientation (OIO) of their planning, monitoring and evaluation systems as a project management tool. Additional aims

of the initiative are to strengthen partners' funding proposals and donor reports to meet BftW and other donor requirements in relation to outcomes and impact. The intention is that this will improve the quality of dialogue and understanding between BftW and its Cambodian partners in relation to OIO.

- **Cambodian Civil Society Strengthening Project**

The five-year Cambodian Civil Society Strengthening (CCSS) project, funded by USAID through the prime grantee East West Management Institute (EWMI), started in 2016, when VBNK was selected to be the implementing agency for the capacity development aspect of the project. The partner organisations in the project are all grantees or sub-grantees of USAID programmes. After facilitating self-assessments of all aspects of their organisation's work, partners are supported to identify their priority needs so that these could be addressed by VBNK through the provision of a multi-year capacity development plan which is supported by an annual action plan. Technical assistance and coaching are provided in relation to good governance and leadership, strategic planning, strengthening monitoring and evaluation systems; clarifying structure and lines of communication; improving financial management - especially in relation to donor compliance; and strengthening human resource management systems, resource mobilisation and advocacy which includes strategic communication.

- **Labor Rights in Cambodia: Trade Union and CSO internal Strengthening and sub-grant preparation program**

VBNK is working with the Solidarity Centre on the Labor Rights in Cambodia (LRIC) project. The aim of VBNK's contribution to LRIC is to strengthen the organisational development and internal operational capacity of selected trade unions in Cambodia to enhance their ability to contribute towards improving industrial relations and labour rights in Cambodia. In order for unions to reach their potential and play a more active role in Cambodia's economic and political development, alongside being able to advocate for changes in labor law, they need to strengthen their internal administrative processes and union office functioning. Through a range of capacity development methodologies and tools, VBNK supports the unions to identify their needs and priorities to build the operational strengths of their federations and local branches.

4.3 Participating organisations

The NGOs and trade unions that participated in the AIA inquiries are listed in the table below.

Full Name and Acronym	Project	Partner since
1. Independent Democratic of Informal Economic Association (IDEA)	LRIC	2020
2. Building and Wood Workers Trade Union Federation of Cambodia (BWTUC)	LRIC	2020
3. Affiliated Network for Social Accountability (ANSA)	CCSS	2019
4. Cambodian Civil Society Partnership (CCSP)	CCSS	2018
5. Building Community Voices (BCV)	CCSS	2018
6. People Center for Development and Peace (PDP)	CCSS	2018
7. Action for Development (AFD)	CCSS	2019
8. Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC)	CCSS	2017
9. Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM)	OIO	2018
10. Morodok	OIO	2016
11. Cambodian Youth Network (CYN)	OIO	2017
12. Salvation Centre Cambodia (SCC)	OIO	2017

5. Findings

5.1 Results of VBNK capacity development support

Most of the CCSS organisations and LRIC trade unions had received a range of organisational development support from VBNK which included coaching to strengthen and improve their financial management systems and processes, and their human resource management and administration systems. Most of the partners had attended VBNK's social media training, and the CCSS partners had also been supported to develop strategic plans, resource mobilisation strategies and advocacy/strategic communications strategies. The OIO partners were mainly supported to strengthen their M&E systems, tools and processes, but received additional support to strengthen their project proposal development and donor reporting. Partners spoke very

positively about their experiences of working with VBNK and how much they appreciated building the capacity of their staff and organisations.

“These topics are useful for us to improve the organisation systems and performance. We are proud and appreciate being a learning organisation”

Uniquely in Cambodia, VBNK uses an ‘accompaniment’ model as an efficient and effective process for achieving sustainable learning and change. Through closely guiding and mentoring participants through a **holistic process** of meeting a capacity need, their learning can be applied confidently to their work to achieve outputs, improvements and lasting change.

When asked if they had been able to implement the learning from the capacity development interventions that VBNK had provided, the majority of the CSOs and trade unions discussed how beneficial the coaching had been for their organisations, especially on financial management.

“VBNK’s team have professional skills and experience of the needs of Cambodian NGOs.”

Staff capacity to better utilise QuickBooks had improved efficiency in budgeting and recording transactions and this had enabled them to report to donors by project in a more timely way. Revised financial policies and procedures ensured that they reflected their actual day-to-day practice whilst also supporting them to be legally compliant; and senior staff reported having a better oversight and understanding of the organisation’s finances. Staff from the participating NGOs reported receiving improved feedback from their auditors and donors, with many of the partners reporting having attracted new donor confidence (and funding), because of their strengthened financial systems.

Those partners who had been supported to develop strategic plans discussed how the process had helped them to consider the current and future context and trends in Cambodia and guided them to map out their organisation’s future direction with a view to sustainability and responding to the enormous changes they project will happen in Cambodian development over the next 3-5 years. Partners reported how developing resource mobilisation strategies to align with their plans had strengthened their ability to build trust and demonstrate to donors that they had a clear and realistic mission, and that they had carefully considered in consultation with their relevant stakeholders, the chosen projects and activities that would support their aims.

Partners who had attended the social media training spoke very positively about their ability to implement their learning which had resulted in them posting much more regularly on their Facebook pages and ensuring that they used good quality images and attractive content to increase engagement with their audiences. The social media training proved critical for the trade unions who needed to use their Facebook page to communicate directly with their members via that platform during the COVID-19 outbreaks. Both the trade unions and the NGOs reported utilising more of the Facebook tools including posting short videos and hosting live broadcasts which increased interactions and positive feedback from their target audiences. Partners

discussed how they had disseminated their learning across their teams and organisations, with one NGO reporting that they had provided the training to citizen journalists in their target communities. The ability of partners to better understand their Facebook statistics and analytics had also supported them to target their posts more effectively, and partners discussed how they were now scheduling posts and sharing success stories more regularly on their pages as these were appreciated by their audiences. Most of the partners reported that the number of ‘follows’, ‘likes’ and ‘shares’ had increased significantly since the training, with one partner discussing a ‘dramatic’ increase with the trebling of ‘followers’ and engagements on their page.

“Our Facebook page and website have become active, living pages because we have a responsible staff to update it regularly. The contents and pictures are more interesting to the audiences and donors. We have increased the number of likes on our Facebook page. It also became a marketing and fundraising tool to generate funding support for the organisation.”

CCSS partners who had received support to strengthen their M&E systems discussed how their data collection had markedly improved and how they are now more able to conduct more in-depth surveys with their beneficiary groups. Partners reported appreciating being able to monitor their activities more effectively against their plans and tracking their achievements against indicators, with many of them discussing how VBNK’s coaching had enabled them to speed up their data collection, analysis and reporting processes. Since receiving coaching from VBNK, some partners had employed a specific M&E officer in recognition of the importance of presenting more robust data which demonstrates outcomes and the impact of their work to their donors and other relevant stakeholders. Those who had been supported to develop databases were ensuring that data was entered and tracked for each of their separate projects, which greatly enhanced their ability to provide impactful reporting to their donors.

The OIO partners reported being supported to develop M&E frameworks with results chains for each project component. This guided them through the monitoring and reporting processes in a more efficient and effective way. They appreciated being able to practically apply the lessons to their own projects so that staff could gain a shared understanding of the project objectives and indicators and practically implement their learning. Partners reported that staff have increased their capacity to observe and report on changes at the output and outcomes levels which has benefited their work with BftW and other donors. All of the partners shared how they had applied the principles and concepts learned through developing project proposals to engage with other donors, with one partner reporting that they had gained three new donors since receiving VBNK’s support. One partner discussed how he had previously been concerned about the lack of report writing skills among his team, as this often meant that he had to carry the full reporting burden.

“Now I observe that my staff, especially the programme manager, have gained more confidence in their report writing skills which now fully complies with the BftW’s report template.”

Helpful feedback from VBANK was one partner reporting that they had experienced a lot of staff turnover both within the M&E team at VBANK and within their own staff team, and this had hindered any progress on implementing their learning. They discussed how the VBANK team M&E consultants brought different facilitation methodologies and ways of coaching to the work, and how this had led to some confusion amongst their team as they were not able to decide which methods to apply to their work. Although they had been supported to enhance their data collection and reporting the double staff turnover had prevented them from applying their learning effectively, and some processes, such as the development of their database, had not yet been completed.

Most of the CCSS and LRIC partners reported being supported to revise their human resources policies so that they better reflected organisational resources and practice and, importantly, were now in compliance with relevant laws and other government requirements. This had resulted in staff having more clarity on their human resources policy and procedures and how it applied to them, with one partner discussing how the process had encouraged them to reintroduce a more formal appraisal process for their staff, ensuring that they were receiving the capacity development or rewards and benefits that their efforts deserved.

“All of the capacity development interventions from VBANK have greatly supported our work and we have observed many changes at the organisational and programme levels as a result.”

The two trade union partners discussed how important the development or updates to their membership databases had been, especially because of the COVID-19 situation where many of their members dispersed to the provinces after the factories and hotels began to close down during 2020. Being able to track and communicate with their members has been essential for ensuring they have been receiving all the legal and financial support to which they are entitled. Although entering the data has been timely, they recognize that the longer-term benefits will also enhance their membership fee collection processes as well as assist them in being able to assess their true membership for collective bargaining purposes.

Three of the interviewed partners had been supported to develop advocacy strategies and they reported that the development of the strategy, in consultation with their target groups, had resulted in their communities being empowered to take the lead on advocacy activities away from the NGOs, resulting in them working more closely with other relevant local partners. This was a specifically pleasing outcome for them as they felt assured that those activities would be sustained after their projects had ended. VBANK supported the partners and their community groups through the processes of planning and implementing advocacy activities. These included mapping all relevant stakeholders and analysing the key actors who they needed to work with as part of their strategic communications. All partners reported that the capacity of their communities to undertake effective advocacy actions had been enhanced and that as a result of their learning, which had also built their confidence, the citizens in their target groups had utilised

their new skills and confidence to conduct both soft and hard advocacy initiatives, with some of them achieving some marked successes.

5.2 Partners' challenges and resulting adaptation in relation to COVID-19

All of the partners discussed the challenges they encountered when trying to continue to deliver their projects and activities, especially outside of Phnom Penh. All partners appreciated the regular and updated guidance from the government which assisted with their adaptations and ensured that they could continue to work safely during this time. However, the related requirements on the adoption of prevention measures had financial implications in terms of needing to purchase masks, alcohol for hand washing and equipment for measuring staff and others' temperatures at their offices and when conducting activities outside.

The restrictions on travel and gatherings placed huge limitations on partners' ability to deliver their projected workplans, which included having to postpone and cancel meetings and activities at their place of work, within Phnom Penh and in their target communities. Annual retreats and other large group activities were cancelled, planned meetings and activities were moved to online platforms where possible, and training had to be conducted with smaller groups in adherence to government guidelines on COVID-19 prevention and protection.

The need to provide training to smaller groups increased activity costs and most partners discussed having to regularly revise and negotiate budget changes with their donors. There was added workload in terms of needing to coordinate more activities included liaison with the local authorities when preparing to deliver training or other activities in the communities, and this added to overall workload burden. Some NGOs reported experiencing additional barriers to their work in the communities with both the community members fearing that NGO staff might bring in COVID-19. Additionally in some cases the local authorities did not fully comply with government guidance, or specifically chose to prevent some activities from taking place, resulting in planned activities being cancelled.

One of the biggest challenges the partners faced was that their staff lacked experience of working online. For many it was the first time they had used some of the online platforms, and so they depended on their ICT staff (if they had them), or external support to orient them to their use. Many staff had returned to their home provinces where internet connections were not as reliable as Phnom Penh, and this posed additional problems. Most of those interviewed reported that their beneficiaries and target groups had very limited ICT capacity which hindered their ability to engage in any online activities. Whilst partners had attempted to build their capacity to work online, they faced challenges with effectively engaging with their target groups, and one partner discussed how the results and outcomes from online working were noticeably reduced with post-activity tests showing lower scores than their face-to-face work. Online working posed additional digital security concerns which some had been able to address, however, this remained an issue to be resolved for most of the partners.

The trade union partners experienced their own specific challenges in relation to the impact of COVID-19 because of the increased unemployment of their members which resulted in sometimes large reductions in membership fees paid. One reported that their membership had reduced from 10,000 to 3,000 as a result of the pandemic. Supporting their members had been difficult, as many had returned to their home provinces from Phnom Penh and had little or no financial resources to enable them to stay in contact with their union officials.

Whilst some partners experienced increased costs, others had budget under-spends because they were not able to deliver their planned activities. Partners discussed donors' changing priorities because of COVID-19, with some partners having their funding reduced (some quite considerably), while others had been able to benefit from new COVID-19 specific funding opportunities offered by their own and other donors. Partners reported needing to remain in constant contact with their donors as planned activities were postponed, sometimes multiple times, or cancelled. Many discussed needing to work longer and harder, and needing to be more flexible, or taking some risks to deliver activities as planned so that they had something on which to report.

In response to some of the challenges, partners adopted protective materials, such as scanners, masks, alcohol spray and wipes, and practiced social distancing in their day-to-day activities. Most remarked on the high costs of implementing these safety measures to comply with government guidance and having to seek donor funding to help them meet those added costs.

A majority of the partners reported that their staff were given the choice of working from home, which many of them did, although this presented new challenges in terms of poor internet connections and being able to manage the change and staff productivity remotely. At least one partner noted that staff efficiency and effectiveness had reduced as a result of home working. Partners reported needing to spend money on ICT equipment, in order to facilitate online working, this included improving the internet or mobile phone connections of some staff so that they could continue their work effectively. All of the partners discussed building their and their local partners' capacity to utilise online platforms, and listed some that they had started to work with including Zoom, Jitsi, Signal, Microsoft Team, Google Meet, Telegram, WhatsApp and Skype. Additionally, many partners reported starting to share documents and files via GoogleDocs.

5.3 Lessons learned by partners through responding to the challenges

All partners were able to identify key learning from their responses to the challenges created by the government precautions in response to COVID-19.

- **The need to be flexible and adaptive to change**

One of the main learnings identified by partners was the need for them to be adaptive and responsive to the changing circumstances. Alongside needing to adapt to ways of working online, partners also needed to shrink the size of the groups they could meet with or train at one time. Being flexible in rescheduling activities was critical to ensuring their ultimate delivery, whilst

partners also learnt the importance of preparation and adapting tools and resources to fit the needs of online working and training.

Additionally, in an effort to meet donor targets and deadlines, some partners discussed needing their staff to be more committed to providing flexible responses in terms of their working days, with some staff reporting working at weekends.

As a result of their learning, some partners discussed factoring COVID-19 into their future planning and budgets to ensure they have a Plan B and even a Plan C to mitigate against further risks. Some partners had already revised policies and procedures to include mitigation factors along with ensuring that their staff have access to the National Social Security Fund in the future.

- **The need for increased capacity to adapt to online working**

All of the partners noted that increasing their capacity to work online had been the most helpful and effective element of their organisation's COVID-19 response, with some mentioning that they will continue to utilise some of the new methods in their work even after the pandemic has subsided. Partners discussed how staff sharing their ICT skills and online working had enabled them to continue many of their activities, whilst online meetings had facilitated groups that wouldn't have been able to meet offline to share information and receive support. However, whilst providing training online has been safer, some partners reported on the reduced effectiveness of online teaching, remarking on fewer interactions with the trainees and wondering whether the learning would be efficiently implemented or ultimately lead to sustainable change.

Conversely, the challenge of staff not having good enough internet connections while working from home was reported by nearly all of the partners who had had to spend additional funds supporting improved connections for essential staff.

Partners all reported that they will continue to build the ICT capacity of their organisations and staff and most of those interviewed reported on the need to increase the ICT capacity of the local NGO partners that they work with in the provinces, along with the community members in their target areas, but that they had limited resources and/or the capacity to support those developments.

- **Tools and resources need adaptation for online use**

Partners discussed needing to adapt their tools and resources, including training materials, so that they could be used effectively via online platforms. They also needed to adapt their methodologies to better fit the requirements of online coaching and training. Partners reported feeling the need to adopt more creative and interactive activities to maintain the engagement of their participants, and discussed how they would start exploring how they could best do that in the future.

- **Close and regular liaison with donors is essential**

Maintaining constant contact with donors was essential for the partners being able to renegotiate budgets and planned activities, although some partners complained that because of their changing priorities, some donors were less responsive, and communication was sometimes very slow.

- **Programme priorities may need to change**

As a result of the impact of COVID-19 on their work, some of the partners also discussed how their project focus has changed or will change in the future because of the livelihood challenges their communities are now facing due to the pandemic. With so many migrants returning home to Cambodia, and with the closure and reductions in the tourism and garment sectors, it is critical that new ways of earning an income are supported by the government and civil society.

5.4 Partners' assessment of VBNK responsiveness

VBNK was keen to learn whether its interventions had been supportive of partners being able to adapt to the COVID-19 situation, and whether we had been able to provide flexible responses to support their work. Overall the feedback about VBNK's support and facilitation skills was very positive, with some partners singling out specific VBNK coaches and interventions for praise.

"When we have a problem, we have the right people to ask and support us"

Partners reported that because of the changing situation, VBNK had contacted them via phone, email or one of the social media platforms to discuss future coaching activities and how they could best be carried out. Partners also discussed needing to reschedule activities with VBNK, and that this didn't seem to pose any problems, with VBNK providing flexible responses as needed. Coaching was adapted to online working where possible, but where face-to-face coaching took place, the partners reported appreciating the fact that the VBNK staff followed the Ministry of Health's safety guidelines in terms of wearing masks, using alcohol to clean their hands and maintaining social distancing in their work.

Some of the partners reported receiving orientation from VBNK on how to utilise specific online platforms so that they could engage in future coaching sessions, and how for some of them, this was the first time they had worked in this way. They also discussed their continued learning in relation to utilising the platforms as they received their coaching from VBNK i.e. that screens could be shared to work on a document together and that mutual website research could also be conducted during the session etc.

The majority of the partners discussed how invaluable the social media training had been in supporting their work during the past year. Their improved skills enabled them to better utilise social media which played an important role in their continued communications with their members, communities and wider audiences through the period of COVID-19 restrictions. Partners discussed increased activity and user engagement on their Facebook pages and

disseminating their learning to their partners and communities so that they could also employ Facebook more effectively to communicate with their target audiences.

The majority of partners reported appreciating VBNK's approach during the past year which they felt supported them to achieve their capacity development objectives whilst still enabling them to make the changes and adaptations necessary to continue working despite the COVID-19 situation.

5.5 Further support needed if COVID-19 continues

Most of the partners requested further support to develop their ICT skills, along with recommending that VBNK also increases its own ICT knowledge so that they can provide high level support in the future. Partners requested more coaching on social media, especially in relation to video production and editing and producing live broadcasts, as well as requesting new training on digital security and the wider use of ICT and online platforms and tools.

More than one partner requested that we conduct a survey among civil society organisations to gain an up-to-date understanding of their capacity development needs, whilst others asked for more coaching, with VBNK dedicating 2.5-3 days per month with them instead of the currently allotted 1.5 days with the CCSS project. Others requested that we conduct more follow-up coaching after the first sessions to review the implementation of their learning and the changes they have made e.g. review their new Facebook page or website, whilst two partners requested that we work more closely with them when planning activity schedules so that they don't clash with activities they have already organised.

With the increased challenges NGOs in Cambodia are facing in terms of the changing donor context, some partners asked for dedicated support with raising funds, especially with developing strong proposals that will stand out from the competition, and with writing quality reports which encourage donors to maintain their support. This would take the form of 'on-the-job' coaching which would result in practical outputs that the organisations could send directly to donors.

Finally, one of the NGO partners proposed that we develop a joint proposal to build the capacity of young people in their target areas on how to effectively utilise social media to mobilise more youth in Cambodia to be involved in social development issues.

6. Analysis and conclusions

6.1 Analysis

- **Partners were able to implement their learning and improve their organisations despite the challenges of COVID-19**

The partners interviewed during this AIA had received a wide range of capacity development support from VBNK, ranging from financial management to social media training, advocacy and membership database development. The majority of partners spoke very positively about their experiences of working with VBNK and how much they appreciated strengthening the capacity of their staff and organisations. They discussed being able to implement the majority of their learning which had enabled them to make improvements at the organisational and individual levels along with strengthening their work with their target groups and communities. As a result of VBNK's interventions, partners had strengthened critical processes including financial management, M&E and membership databases, and some reported on increased donor confidence which had resulted in continued funding and new donor support. All of these positive results were achieved despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 situation, which is a very encouraging indicator of these organisations' capacity to overcome challenges and be resilient.

- **The low ICT capacity of staff and lack of experience of working online created challenges**

All partners reported their biggest challenge being the low capacity and lack of experience of staff to adapt to online working. Many discussed how this was the first time some of their staff had ever used some of the platforms, but they appreciated that their own more experienced staff and the VBNK coaches helped to orient some of their team members on how best to utilise the platforms to support their continued work through the COVID-19 situation. Some organisations had received additional training and support from external actors to strengthen their ICT capacity during this time. Related to the internal challenge was the limited ICT capacity of their beneficiaries and target groups, especially those outside Phnom Penh, which resulted in activities being delayed and even cancelled. This presented additional challenges with partners needing to regularly negotiate revised schedules and budgets with donors.

In terms of what had been the most effective adaptations they had made in response to COVID-19, all partners noted that increasing the ICT capacity of their staff had been critical for them to be able to continue their work.

- **Enhanced engagement via social media platforms was critical**

All partners that had staff who had attended the social media training reported on the important improvements they had been able to make to their Facebook pages, and how critical the enhanced audience engagement had been during the COVID-19 situation. Some organisations had used Facebook as their main messaging tool during the outbreak, especially the unions whose members had dispersed to the provinces after the garment and tourism industries shrunk or ceased to operate. Facebook became an important messaging tool with partners posting

information videos and conducting live broadcasts to raise awareness of safety, legal and social issues via their platforms.

- **Being responsive and adaptable to change is critically important**

All partners were impacted by COVID-19 and needed to adapt their ways of working in response. Significant change arose from having staff working from home and having to rearrange activities and move their work to online platforms. Additionally, partners endeavoured to follow government guidance on prevention and protection against COVID-19 which included needing to ensure staff were practicing social distancing measures, were wearing masks and using alcohol on a regular basis to clean their hands when they were in the office or conducting activities outside. Partners reported on the multiple challenges they had encountered as they attempted to adapt to the new situation, not least in terms of the increased costs they incurred as noted above.

Being responsive and adaptable to the changing situation was essential, including reducing the size of groups they met with, especially online, to not only comply with government requirements, but also to ensure the engagement and active participation of individuals in those smaller groups. Most partners discussed needing to maintain constant and regular contact with their donors to enable them to revise plans and budgets to support their need to be flexible to the ever-changing situation.

- **VBNK's flexible and responsive approach during COVID-19 was helpful**

Partners appreciated VBNK's flexibility in working around their changing priorities, especially any support they received in relation to utilising the online platforms so that they could continue to receive coaching remotely. Respondents discussed how responsive VBNK were to their need to reschedule coaching sessions and sometimes to reschedule again. For those partners who were able to meet face-to-face, VBNK's compliance and promotion of the Ministry of Health's guidelines was very much welcomed.

- **Remaining in close contact with donors is essential for providing flexible responses to target communities**

Donors' priorities changed during the global pandemic, and for some this had meant reductions in funding, whilst for others it provided new funding opportunities. However some partners had experienced delays in communication with their donors, which had hindered their ability to be as responsive as they would have liked. Keeping in close contact to understand challenges, change and responses on both sides is very important.

- **The need for planning and risk assessment going forward**

All partners acknowledged that they need to factor COVID-19 into their planning and risk assessments for 2021 in a more consistent way than they had previously. This would help to ensure that their activity planning can be more flexible and that they have already had the conversations with donors if they need to move to Plan B or Plan C in terms of project delivery and budgets.

6.2 Conclusions

At the time of writing (March 2021) Cambodia is experiencing its biggest community outbreak with numbers of infections and deaths rising on a daily basis. This will inevitably further impact on the VBNK's work and the work of other NGOs and trade unions in Cambodia.

Managing change and being able to adapt to the ever-changing situation in Cambodia throughout 2020 has resulted in a number of key lessons being learnt by the NGOs and organisations interviewed during this AIA.

Increasing the ICT capacity of organisations and individual staff has been critical, and all partners discussed needing to do much more of this during the coming year. Some partners discussed how they will continue to adopt some of the new ways of working, even after the COVID-19 situation subsides. Needing to adapt tools and resources for online working has been essential for ensuring the engagement of all participants, and partners have recognized their need to explore further creative ways of working online to support the delivery of dynamic and engaging workshops, meetings and training in the future. This will probably include needing to purchase more hardware and ICT equipment such as cameras, microphones and mobile routers etc. to facilitate those improvements. Partners specifically asked for more support from VBNK in relation to further capacity development in relation to ICT and social media to support their transition to working more effectively online.

Exploring how the beneficiaries within their target groups and communities can better access and engage with ICT tools will also be a critical consideration going forward. Partners discussed needing to have conversations with their donors about providing the tools and resources to facilitate improved engagement in the communities. This might include paying for enhanced internet connections to community centres, and providing laptops and projectors so that important conversations and consultations can continue remotely.

Some partners saw their funding reduced during 2020 as a result of changed donor priorities, and with the increased challenges NGOs are facing in raising new funding, some requested specific and practical support to develop strong funding proposals and donor reports that would help them respond to the changing context. Conversely some partners were able to access funds made available by donors specifically to support responses to the impact of COVID-19 on communities.

There is a compelling need for both NGOs and trade unions to demonstrate their strengths and flexibility to adapt to change so that they can sustain their activities and achieve their objectives at this juncture in Cambodia's development. It was, therefore, good affirmation of VBNK's approach and work that the majority of partners reported appreciating VBNK's support during the past year which they felt assisted them to achieve their capacity development objectives, whilst still enabling them to make the changes and adaptations necessary during the COVID-19 situation. Overall, the feedback from partners about VBNK's interventions was very positive,

reporting important outcomes and institutional strengthening as a result of their improved organisational and programme capacity.

“VBNK’s team helped us to make important changes to the way we implemented our programme.”

Most partners had been able to make the changes needed to adapt to the COVID-19 situation, but this had increased their workload, and their costs in terms of added expenditure for ICT and personal protective equipment, and because they also needed to deliver more activities to smaller groups, there were additional travel, accommodation and per diem costs entailed.

Some of the NGOs and trade unions reported that because of the changing situation of many of their constituents who have returned from working overseas or who have lost their jobs as a result of the impact of COVID-19, they will also be making changes to their programme focus and interventions going forward. Unemployment, debt and fear about the future are impacting on many of the communities with which they work, and so their new focus will be on supporting livelihood projects and skills training to help mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. They do not see the pandemic and its associated problems being resolved in the near future and expect that livelihood and core issues like food security, especially overcoming hunger, will emerge as pressing concerns during 2021.

List of abbreviations

AIA	Annual Impact Assessment
BftW	Bread for the World
CCC	Cooperation Committee Cambodia
CCSS	Cambodian Civil Society Strengthening Project
EWMI	East West Management Institute
FGD	Focus group discussion
ICT	Information and communication technology
KII	Key informant interview
LRIC	Labour Rights in Cambodia
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
OIO	Outcome and Impact Orientation
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VBNK	Vicheasthan Bamreu Neaksamrabsamroul Kangia Aphiwat

Annex: Key criteria and over-arching questions

1. To what extent, have the partner NGOs been able to utilise the capacity development interventions from VBNK to support their work?
2. To what extent has the COVID-19 situation affected their organisation in delivering their plan/project activities?
3. What changes and adjustments did their organisation have to make to address those effects? Which have been the most helpful and effective?
4. What challenges has their organisation faced in trying to address the impact of the COVID-19 on their work?
5. What has their organisation learned about change and change management as a result of the COVID-19 situation?
6. Has the COVID-19 situation impacted on their organisation's current or future funding? If so, how?
7. Have they developed any mechanisms at the organisational and community levels that will promote more resilience to future shocks (such as COVID-19) or other external factors?
8. Was VBNK able to be flexible and responsive to the needs and priorities of their organisation whilst delivering capacity development interventions during the COVID-19 situation?
9. Were VBNK's interventions helpful during that time? Were we supportive of them making the necessary changes or did we distract them from other organisational/project delivery priorities?
10. What role did VBNK play, if any, in supporting their organisation to better utilise social media or ICT in their response to the impact of COVID-19 on their work?
11. What do they expect to be the most pressing capacity development needs in 2021 and how can VBNK support them?
12. How can VBNK's services be improved to further support their organisation in the future?