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Media & Good Governance

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Introduction

It is a fact that we are on the way of development the pursuit of which requires reforms with good governance. The significance of these requirements seems to be double or even triple for Cambodia in particular: a change from two decades of centralized system to that of a free market, a peace that has just come out after dozens of years of destructive wars, and a strong demand by the international donor community.

Presumably, for that reason, at least one seminar was held in Cambodia early in the year by the Cambodian Institute of Human Rights in cooperation with the Ministry of Interior. Today’s event, I believe, is no way less important as it provides a forum for an international exchange of experiences and ideas especially among those countries with similar political, social, and economic background, and it deals with media.

Good governance is actually something we have been talking about and dealing with either directly or indirectly for all our life. But, to be honest, just the term is new (at least to me, if not to all of you). Nevertheless, that doesn’t mean we are successful in implementing nor in promoting it. On the other hand, there is a lot of constraints for us to overcome.

One would easily answer the question “How come?”: the tragic history of Cambodia and its recent experience is indicative of lack of good governance. In the paper, I will be talking about only the main opportunities and challenges that reflect the strength and weakness of good governance in Cambodia and also in reflection of democracy, as it is the governing system we are in, and how it is handled by the media with, at the end, the involvement of my organization, the Cambodia Communication Institute, in that process.

Opportunities

We now abide by the principle of multi-party democracy, a system of public participation, we have peace for the first time in about three decades with relatively a political stability, we join ASEAN, we have a strong support of the international community in both financial and technical assistance for national development.

At the conference of ICORC (International Conference on Reconstruction of Cambodia) in Tokyo last February, the donor community pleged a development aid of US$470 million, which
is tightly linked to reforms and good governance especially administrative reform, military demobilization, logging policy...and so on. The condition has been openly accepted by the Cambodian Government. The acceptance was then reassured to the Cambodian public by Prime Minister Hun Sen at a press conference upon his arrival from the meeting.

Since then, in compliance with the agreement at the ICORC conference, there have been meetings every three months between the Government and donor representatives to review the implementation of the promised reforms with which the donors seem to be satisfied.

"My colleagues and I were encouraged by the government's strong political will and determination to do reforms", said the Japanese Ambassador, Masaki Saito, quoted by the Cambodia Daily, after the last meeting late last month.

Dominique McAdams, the UN Development Program's resident representative, according to the Cambodia Daily, called the meeting a success. "Of course, there is need for additional effort and concrete action," she said.

Her comments can be balanced with the recent threat by the Nobel Prize-winning Medecins Sans Frontieres to withdraw from Cambodia citing "the lack of transparency" in the Ministry of Finance's allocation of money to provinces.

I am bringing up these facts to your attention just to highlight one of the main opportunities that can be taken especially by the media. But there are, of course, many more.

In their work for development, the Royal Cambodian Government has been assisted by dozens of UN agencies and international organizations as well as about 500 registered Non-Governmental Organizations whose contribution is believed to be substantial.

At the political arena, Cambodia's parliament consists of three main parties to represent people's will two of which form the present coalition Government with the third serves as the opposition whose role, according to democratic principles, is to keep track of the Government policy and its implementation - on many occasions the opposition goes along with the media.

With the freedom of expression guaranteed by the Constitution, a largely free media have been established since the early 1990s and expanded with 6 TV channels (5 private, exclusive of the provincial stations) and 12 private FM radio stations plus the National Radio AM and the FM 96, with a free press consisting of over 200 newspapers as of today, are striving for development.

While journalism in the West is as old as back in the 17th century, Cambodian journalism is relatively young and immature, even compared with other Asian nations. The first newspaper in national language (Khmer) was not published until 1936 when the press, for example, in the Philippines was on its way into its modern period.

Like the press in other Asian countries, however, the Cambodian press is an offspring of the West and so the early publications could not escape Western influence. Over the years, the development of the Cambodian press has been linked closely to politics and has been of wild
swings from chaotic freedom to almost complete suppression along with the radical changes of government and government policy.

As of 1991 before the arrival of the United Nations Transitional Authorities in Cambodia, the Ministry of Information & Culture had a role in the publishing/printing and cinema sectors, while radio and television broadcasting (there was only one television station and one radio station in Phnom Penh, the TVK and the National Radio AM) and newspaper publishing (there were only four major newspapers circulating) were handled by individual agencies. Provincial authorities had small information offices to disseminate relevant news within the provinces. There was no formalized government general information structure in Cambodia as found in other countries (UNESCO Report).

But today, considerable media development has been observed. One of the most visible legacies of the UN in post-UNTAC Cambodia is the boisterous and greatly expanded print media which is as many as 206, according to the official registration with the Ministry of Information, and a total of about 2 dozens of broadcasting stations all over the country.

As dramatic as these changes in the print media have been, and as noticeable as they are in Phnom Penh, they are only part of a wider pattern of social, economic and political transformation that has occurred in Cambodia since the signing of the Paris Peace Accord and the establishment of “the Second Kingdom of Cambodia”. Despite constraints, the young Cambodian media have made a significant contribution to national development.

Two general elections have been held since 1993 the first of which was organized by UNTAC. The turnout to the 23-May 1993 polls participated by 21 political parties was close to 90%, the highest rate in Cambodia’s democratic election history. The recent general elections (26 July, 1998) were even more impressive in the sense that they were organized by the Cambodian Government with 39 political parties contesting. The turnout was a bit lower, but still high. A large part of the success is undoubtedly attributed to the media. There are many other examples of the constructive role played by the “young” Cambodian media, especially the print, though it is generally seen as politically affiliated. However, the recent developments are quite encouraging. Let me tell you one of them.

There was a big scandal late 1998 when 3,000 tons of toxic waste (mercury-tainted) was imported from Taiwan and dumped 14km from the sea-port city of Sihanoukville. It was the press which discovered and reported it to the public four days later. Joined by the electronic media at a later stage, especially radios, the awareness of the scandal became not only nationwide but also world wide. The whole press, regardless of political background, covered the story without political slant. The story was brought to the attention of not only local people but also international environmentalists whose strong reaction have led to the return of the waste to its origine.

That is the typical role to be played by the media in order to promote good governance and national development. Just imagine what would happen to the people of Sihanoukville without the press. However, that is just a limited portion of success generated by the media. There are many more that media fail to win over due to a number of constraints.
Challenges

To talk about good governance, as far as I can see, we can't refrain from talking about leadership which is then linked to power. Like many other countries, Cambodia has been under a paternalistic leadership for generations. It becomes almost a habit that one should accept whatever he/she is trained to be. The younger has to listen to the elder. School children have to learn by memory what is taught before they can think about it. Out of the current concept of paternalistic leadership, the power in Cambodia is "Unquestionable and Unchallengeable Power". The gap between the powerful and the powerless is so large that it is hard for the media to serve as the bridge. This cultural constraint is one of the major challenges apart from the political one.

In the case of the toxic waste, it is such a big scandal and the fact that it ended up with being removed to its original place is only a part of success. More serious actions should have been taken so that accountability and transparency can be promoted.

However, in a culture that the ruled are not prepared to challenge the rulers unless they are directly badly hurt, it seems that the solution is acceptable. That kind of action will risk more abuse of power, corruption, unaccountability, lack of transparency... to the disadvantage of good governance and development.

Politicization is also a problem. In Cambodia, not only politicians are split in line with the politics they support, but also, the civil administration, the military, the police, the civil society and even the media. This is the legacy of decades of conflicts, fighting and turmoil and nobody can be singled out to blame.

It has created a major hinderance to development because the public are deprived of their basic needs of accurate information. How can people be well-informed as both the providers and publishers of information are biased due to political consideration? Though it is seen that media do have rooms of independence, the public remain vulnerable to disinformation as in many cases the media is manipulated by politicians.

One common complaint by journalists everywhere in the world is about their access to information. Cambodia is not an exception. But the problem may be much less in those societies with long tradition of democracy and strong professional media. It is hard already for journalists to fight for their access to information. But in Cambodia, it is even harder in such a situation where access is allowed to a journalist but, at the same time, the other is denied for political discrimination.

Fortunately, reforms are now underway and progress has been made in this regard especially since the formation of the new coalition Government with, relatively, a political stability. However, there is still a lot to be done and the media should take the lead.

While fighting for their rights, the media themselves also face professional constraints. Cambodia, during the Khmer Rouge time, lost the majority of its skill personnel, particularly educated mid-level professionals and technicians. In the media sector, only four radio broadcasting engineers and few print journalists or newspaper technical personnel are believed to
have survived the conflict. Journalism training opportunities are limited. Despite a few journalists who have had formal journalism education abroad since 1979 and some useful staff exchanges with foreign countries, formal journalism education is not available and most of Cambodian journalists have only received “on the job training”. Some improvement have been made after the establishment of the Cambodia Communication Institute in 1994 and a journalism training program at the Royal University of Phnom Penh in the following year. But the opportunities are still limited as they are all on short-term adhoc basis.

It is likely due to that constraint together with the political environment I have just mentioned above as well as the economic situation in the country that the media have sometime failed to perform their duty well. A journalist with unsolid professional training, under poor economic situation together with political pressure is vulnerable to manipulation by politicians.

Good governance applies to all institutions, not only the Government but also the private sector and civil society. The development role of Non-Governmental Organizations is not only recognized but also promoted especially by the United Nations. Unfortunately, the media fail to pay much attention to them. According to my personal and non formal assessment, less than 10% of the published materials are about civil society, 10% about private sector (ads are not included) and less than 20% about social issues, while the rest is devoted to politics.

As per freedom of the press, I personally would say that the press in Cambodia is relatively free. But to be effective enough to promote good governance and national development the press needs not only to be free to say and publish. What is also important and needed is the access to information, and the ability to process the information in such a responsible way that the readers can either understand or cannot be misled.

To quote Michael Wickery, a well-known scholar of Cambodia: “In spite of occasional heavy-handed reactions from the authorities, there is more press freedom today than at any time since 1955”.

CCI’s Contribution

CCI was established in September, 1994 as the first journalism school in Cambodia under the agreement between the Royal Government of Cambodia and UNESCO. Its main objective is to promote public participation in democracy through the increase of people’s access to information and the improvement of media output.

In reflection of the objective, CCI has organized hundreds of journalism training workshops and seminars related to media development. As of today, there are over 3,000 people (some of them have attended more than one training course/workshop/seminar) who have participated in our programs. Most of the participants are working journalists and the rest are government information officers, information staff of NGOs, international organizations, UN agencies and aspiring students.

As this is not a report but a discussion paper, I don’t think I should get into the details with figures. Instead, let me brief you a few of our main activities to demonstrate how we contribute to the promotion of good governance.
As recent as last year, before the elections, we organized a series of five training courses on election reporting for about 100 working journalists. The aim was to enable the journalists to play an active role in providing the voters with necessary information and education so that the voters were helped to participate as much as they could in the decision making process. Apart from media experts, politicians, lawyers and prominent people from the civil society were also invited to talk during the courses.

Between late last year and early this year, a few training workshops were held particularly for Government Information Officers with the aims of reinforcing those who had been through the training a few years ago and to train the newly appointed at the same time. But the overall objective is to push for a good mutual understanding of the role of Government spokesmen and the media so that an environment of transparency could be improved through mutual trust.

Around that period of time, CCI has conducted a few training courses on social issues reporting partly based on informal study that some newspapers were about to go bankrupt at the time of political stability because their reporters' journalism skills were only limited to politics. It was also our aim to bring more media's attention to development journalism. Our informal monitoring have proved an increase in press coverage of social issues and development work. But it is still below the mid-level and the quality needs to be much more improved. Many of the journalists are not yet able to cover and monitor social and developmental issues effectively nor can they come up with serious analysis.

As a training institution, this is the typical contribution CCI can make to assist media promote good governance, apart from providing informal consultancy, coordinating overseas study tours and exchange programs.

**Conclusion**

We admit that, in Cambodia, disinformation and misinterpretation some time come out of irresponsible and unethical journalism, but very often, lack of access to information for which I strongly recommend serious actions. The respect of media's role should no longer be rhetorical but practical. The society should not necessarily see the media as the adversary to the authorities (as in the American culture), but as their partners in the development front, though sometimes they are critical. A national effort must be made to promote participatory culture as it would be to much to leave it all for the media.

However, to fell down a tree, we need either an axe or a saw, and not a nife. Likewise, to effectively promote good governance and reforms, we need a strong media. So media development should not be lost sight of. How much can media help promote national development when they themselves are still “under-developed”? Skill is just a component that have to go together with freedom, commitment to ethics, responsibility, integrity, impartiality and, somehow, facilities. That doesn't mean we have to wait until the media is fully developed to start. What I mean by that is the media should strive also for their own development at the same time as they are also subject to good governance.

Thank you for your attention!