Visiting MPs Learn about Cambodia’s Development

Standing beside her 20-meter-by-15-meter experimental paddy field, Iean Im, a farmer in Daun Peng commune, in Siem Reap province’s Angkor Chum district, welcomed a high-level delegation of 13 parliamentarians from countries in Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America. “Here is my test rice,” she says. “Its yield is very good, and I am very happy.” She pauses and points to her successful new crop, then continues: “I decided to test this new way of growing because I have been troubled by drought and low yields in past years.”

The parliamentarian delegation visited Cambodia from November 11 to 16, 2007, to witness on the ground Cambodia’s development efforts. The visit was hosted by the National Assembly of Cambodia and co-organized by the Parliamentary Network on the World Bank (PNoWB), the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), and the World Bank Cambodia. The Members of Parliaments (MPs) visited projects in agriculture, health, education, and infrastructure and had in-depth discussions with Cambodia’s major stakeholders, including government officials, parliamentary delegations led by the Presidents of the National Assembly and the Senate, local PNoWB members, civil society, youth, and representatives from the donor community and the private sector.

The field visit program is one of the PNoWB’s key activities, organized jointly with the World Bank and supported by a grant from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland. Its purpose is to foster a better understanding among parliamentarians of development activities and the role of the World Bank in recipient countries. Since its inception in May 2000 as an informal network of individual parliamentarians, the PNoWB has strengthened the voice of parliaments in the development debate. It has grown to include more than 1000 MPs from 110 countries and mobilizes parliamentarians in the fight against global poverty, promotes transparency and accountability in international development, and offers a platform for policy dialogue between the World Bank and parliamentarians.

In Siem Reap province, the MPs were briefed by World Bank Development Policy Dialogue Manager Jean-Christophe Bas about the purpose and objective of the visit, including a briefing on the World Bank dialogue with parliamentarians and the Parliamentary Network of the World Bank. The MPs were also briefed by Asian Development Bank (ADB) Country Director Arjun Goswami about ADB activities in Cambodia, by WorldFish Center Regional Director Dr. Blake Ratner about the center’s work in the Greater Mekong Subregion, and by World Bank Cambodia Country Manager Nisha Agrawal about the Bank’s activities in Cambodia. At the end of that day the MPs enjoyed a dinner with a Khmer cultural performance.

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The first two days of the visit was hosted by the CGIAR and the parliamentarians visited several of their projects in Cambodia. CGIAR is a strategic alliance of members, partners and international agricultural centers that mobilizes science to benefit the poor. It works to achieve sustainable food security and reduce poverty in developing countries through scientific research and research-related activities in the fields of agriculture, forestry, fisheries, policy, and environment.

During the field visit in Angkor Chum district of Siem Reap the team visited successful experimental rice fields, then visited a rice mill in Siem Reap town supported by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) through a program called Poverty-Reduction Option Validated in Drought Environment (PROVIDE). PROVIDE aims to increase rice yield through the adoption of improved rice farming practices. Blake Ratner, CGIAR representative in Cambodia, said agriculture and agricultural research remain of paramount importance to the Cambodian economy: “We need policymakers to strengthen the vital role agriculture plays in poverty reduction.”

Next day, the parliamentarians visited an irrigation scheme in the province of Kampong Speu province which implemented with technical assistance of International Water Management Institute (IWMI). Parliamentarians were able to interact directly with farmers, and evaluate results on the ground. Farmers explained that now they were able to grow two crops per year while before they could grow only one. Following this visit, the parliamentarians went to Cel Agrid – an NGO that partners with CIAT to produce cassava for pig feeding.

On the same day, the parliamentarians visited the Cambodia Agricultural Research and Development Institute (CARDI). At the institute the team discussed activities that CARDI, WorldFish, and IRRI are doing in Cambodia. They raised some points included: need to link farmers to markets; need to create cooperatives among farmers; so that they are able to access markets more efficiently; need for vocational training in areas related to agriculture; and need for technology transfer. Then the team visited the experimental fields in the CARDI compound.

The next part of their visit was hosted by the World Bank Group. It started with a dinner meeting with development partners to hear from them about the progress that Cambodia was making in donor coordination and the Paris Declaration agenda of harmonization and alignment.

PNoWB
Communications
Advisor Jean-
Christophe Bas, second
from left, talks to
parliamentarians and
donors at a dinner
meeting.
Ms. Thun Sokleng, the only woman member of the Rokar Koh Commune Council, tells the visiting MPs of the challenges she faces in her elected role.

The next morning, it took nearly an hour on 15 km of a bumpy, muddy road to bring the team to see the Rokar Koh Health Center, one of the centers supported by the World Bank and other development partners through the Health Sector Support Project. At the health center, the team met Health Minister H.E. Nuth Sokhom, provincial health department officers and health center staff, and patients who had come to use the center’s services. The MPs exchanged views, suggestions and questions on health issues.

Just five minutes walk from the health center, at Rokar Koh commune office the MPs met seven commune council members representing the Cambodian Peoples Party, the Sam Rainsy Party, and the Norodom Ranariddh Party. The parliamentarians were briefed by the commune chief about its development, especially about the decentralization process. The commune councilors had prepared their presentation thoroughly. On the walls of the council building large sheets of white paper showed the location of the village and province, their normal livelihood activities, the quota of female councilors, how many people live in the commune – male and female – the role and responsibility of the commune councilors, what projects have been undertaken so far, where the money is expected to be spent in the coming year, and the priorities set by the community. Through a program funded from the national budget, and supported by the World Bank and other development partners, around US$10,000 is granted to each of Cambodia’s 1621 communes every year for projects that the people in each community regard as keys to escaping poverty and improving their lives. The MPs also had an interesting discussion with a female councilor of Rokar Koh commune Thun Sokleng who was in charge of women and children about the choices and challenges she faces in her political career.

Upon their return to Phnom penh, the team had an informal working lunch with the staff of the World Bank Group. This provided them with an opportunity to learn more about the World Bank’s strategy and program in Cambodia.
After that the delegation went to the beautiful new National Assembly building to meet with Samdech Heng Samrin. The MPs thanked Samdech Heng Samrin President of the National Assembly for the warm welcome they had received and for the excellent arrangements made by the National Assembly for hosting their visit. The courtesy meeting with Samdech Heng Samrin was followed by an indepth discussion lasting more than three hours on a range of development issues. In an open debate with heads of six of Cambodia’s parliamentary commissions, the visiting MPs praised the Cambodian government for its exemplary achievements in development but also raised several issues of concern, including the need to strengthen governance, fight corruption and address problems of deforestation, natural resource management and better representation of women in decision-making processes.

That evening, the MPs had a dinner meeting with senior members of the Cambodian government including Senior Minister Keat Chhon, Minister of Economy and Finance, Senior Minister Men Sam An, Minister of National Assembly-Senate Relations and Inspection, Senior Minister Dr. Kol Pheng, Minister of Education Youth and Sport, H.E. Thong Khon, Minister of Tourism, H.E. Veng Sakhon, Secretary of State of Water Resources and Meteorology Ministry, H.E. Eng Huot, Secretary of State of Health Ministry, H.E. Ngy Chanphal, Under Secretary of State of Interior Ministry, and Mr. Sar Sovan, Director of Land Management and Administration Project of Ministry of Land Management Urban Planning and Construction.

On the morning of the fifth day of the visit, the MPs visited the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, where thousands of Cambodians were tortured and killed. The visit was hosted by the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam).
NGO Forum Executive Director Chhith Sam Ath briefs Parliamentarians about NGO activities in Cambodia.

At a lunch with civil society representatives, the team heard about activities that various NGOs are working on in Cambodia, such as land grabbing, deforestation, legal, agriculture, corruption and assisting disabled and disadvantaged people. The meeting was hosted at the Hagar restaurant. Hagar is a Swiss NGO providing comprehensive poverty reduction program and working with victims of violence, sexual abuse, abandonment and poverty. It provides job opportunities for the women through its three income-generating initiatives: a handicraft workshop, a soy milk factory, and a catering service.

On the afternoon of that day, the parliamentarians visited a school to learn about the education sector in Cambodia. At Hun Sen Kampong Phnom secondary school, the MPs were welcomed by hundreds of students and H.E. Mak Van, Secretary of State of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, and education department officers of Kandal province. The MPs heard that enrollment in schools in Cambodia was increasing and school facilities were improving, and were told about a scholarship program through the Education Sector Support Project which is supported by World Bank. The MPs talked to teachers, community representatives and students.

The parliamentarians also learned about the World Bank Small Grants Program: a US$12,000 World Bank grant to the Khmer Youth and Social Development Organization (KYSD) to promote women as partners in promoting of Gender and Good Governance in the Community in two provinces. Their target groups are young people, particularly students. At their workshop, the MPs spoke with young people and gave them encouragement and motivation and advice for their future.

At a dinner meeting with the private sector the team talked to private sector representatives and heard about the business environment in Cambodia. The team also heard from James Brew about the IFC’s activities in Cambodia. Mr. Brews said the IFC has been operating in Cambodia since 1998 and had committed over $40 million in investments to the country across three key sectors: infrastructure, financial markets, and agribusiness. IFC Investment provides equity or loans to private companies that demonstrate good corporate practices, create jobs, and contribute to economic


From left: Acleda CEO Mr. In Chhany, ANZ Head of Treasury Neil Rodrigues, and Switzerland MP Simon Epiney at the meeting dinner with Private Sector.

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growth; IFC Advisory Services target poverty reduction through interrelated programs that seek to improve the business environment, develop the financial sector, promote social and environmental sustainability, and add value to firms.

On the morning of their final day the visiting parliamentarians met Cambodian Senate President Samdech Chea Sim, who told them of Cambodia’s fight against corruption and moves towards good governance, and also spoke about agricultural development.

The final visit of the MPs’ six days in Cambodia was to the Water Treatment Plant (WTP) in Chruoy Changvar. The team was welcomed and taken on tour by H.E. Ek Sun Chan, General Director of the Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority (PPWSA). The WTP, which was supported by the World Bank and other development partners, provides the capital city with 235 000 cubic meters of clean water per day, 24 hours/day.

Despite the very busy working schedule, the visiting MPs also managed to find a few moments to visit the beautiful silver pagoda in the Royal Palace and also to squeeze in the delights of the famous Russian Market (Tuol Tompong market).

The trip to Cambodia ended with a press conference. At the conference the leader of the parliamentarian delegation, Quentin Davies, a member of Britain’s House of Commons and of its International Development Committee of the House of Commons, said: “Cambodia is probably the most striking example of successful emergence from conflict and destruction in the world. It is sustaining growth rates of 10% per annum and this is a fine achievement by any standards.”

However, he added, corruption is still a concern for the country’s development. “We have been delighted to receive assurances from Ministers and from the Presidents of the National Assembly and Senate that the government is committed to bring in the anti-corruption law,” he said “What has disappointed us is that we haven’t got any idea of what the timing of that promise might involve, but we hope it won’t be too far delayed.”

Nigerian parliamentarian Gbenhga Makanjuola urged Cambodia to develop a strong agricultural policy. He said the Cambodian government needed to develop strong, clear agricultural policy that would put food on the table for all Cambodians.

World Bank Cambodia Country Manager Nisha Agrawal said: “The World Bank in Cambodia is dedicated to promoting development, fighting poverty and to improving the lives of Cambodian people. Therefore it is very important for us that Parliamentarians as elected representatives can see by themselves if and how World Bank programs are effectively reaching their objective, contributing to poverty alleviation and better governance.”

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