



Mushroom farming is one of the livelihood activities that several families in Plan's Empowering Families project have taken up. The mushrooms are grown by families and can be used in their meals and sold at the local market. Photo: Plan International Australia (Plan)

Introduction

Working with non-government organisations (NGOs) is an integral part of Australia's aid program. Australian NGOs bring particular strengths to our overseas aid effort. Some have been working in international aid and development for more than 60 years, mobilising public support and voluntary contributions for aid, and working in areas that are difficult to access, like remote or conflict-affected regions. Many NGOs also have valuable expertise in working in emergency situations where fast and flexible responses are essential.

Many Australian NGOs receive funding through the AusAID NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP). The ANCP supports more than 40 accredited Australian NGOs to undertake community-based development work which has a direct and tangible impact on poverty in developing countries.

The ANCP is a growing program. In 2010–11, \$69 million was distributed to NGOs through the program, and an expected \$110 million will be provided in 2012–13.

Consistent with the Civil Society Engagement Framework (CSEF) and this expansion, AusAID has teamed up with Australian NGOs and the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) to assess the work of some parts of the program, to better understand what is being achieved, and work out ways to improve. The specific experiences and lessons of NGOs under ANCP can be applied to improve results both for the ANCP and for the aid program as a whole.

2011 AusAID NGO Cooperation Program Thematic Review

The 2011 Thematic Review is the first in this series of research and evaluation activities. This first review is entitled *How do ANCP activities engage with the poorest and most marginalised people?*

The aim of the review was to learn the critical elements of development practice that NGOs in the ANCP use to reach the poorest and most marginalised people and bring sustainable change to their lives. It also analysed possible barriers to this being achieved.

An independent review team used a combination of research, case studies and discussions with NGOs to test how NGOs specifically target the poorest and most vulnerable people in a community, and if the work of the NGOs was successful.

Key Findings

So what did we find? This review team confirmed that NGOs participating in the ANCP have a deep understanding of poverty. This allows them to develop activities that more effectively tackle the fundamental barriers and disadvantages experienced by the poorest and most marginalised.

The review confirmed that, through the ANCP, NGOs recognise that poverty is more than whether people regularly have enough food to eat, or a house to live in, or have a secure income. They work on the basis that they know that the poorest are both poor *and* excluded. The poorest people rarely enjoy the tangible benefits of development, such as more money through employment or business opportunities, because in addition to being poor, they are shut out, or left out, of the community and from contributing to decisions that affect their lives.

People can be excluded for a whole range of reasons, such as on the basis of caste, family connections, ethnicity, religion, political ties, health status, geographic location, a lack of basic literacy or inability to speak the national language. For all types of reasons, it takes extra time, effort and resources to reach these people.

NGOs in the ANCP invested this extra time needed to identify the poorest and marginalised, who are often women, children, the aged and infirm, and people living with a disability. NGOs relied on longstanding ties with local community members, leaders and partners to provide insights into a community but acknowledged that sometimes this was not enough to help identify the poorest groups within that community.

Some NGOs reported that they needed to provide training to help their own partners overcome ingrained ideas and thinking that kept marginalised groups invisible or ignored. NGOs accepted that, at least initially, their programs were filling a gap where government services and programs have failed to reach the poorest. In this way, the ANCP not only helps the poorest and marginalised directly; it can also help to build the awareness of local partners to a wider array of issues and needs.

The review captured the many challenges to helping the poorest people. Local power structures; seasonal absences for work; social exclusion and stigma; low self-esteem; and a lack of understanding of basic rights all compound peoples' experience of poverty.

One way to overcome barriers to the poorest participating in programs was for NGOs to provide material incentives to individuals and families to become involved and stay involved. Assistance such as shelter, food, clothing, medical services and access to credit for small loans

Chhay Sorng and her family have participated in the Empowering Families project since 2007. The project's five-step counselling process has helped Chhay build the confidence to make some remarkable changes in her life following the end of the Khmer Rouge's rule. Photo: Plan International Australia (Plan)





Above left: Keang Tat, aged 35, moved to the village of Sambour three years ago from a floating village on Tonle Sap with her husband and children. She explained that although permaculture food gardening is hard work, it is much easier than her life before. Her food garden is small but very productive and she has been able to feed her family and her animals well. Photo: Quaker Service Australia

Above right: Village entrepreneur Ka Phart, Cambodia, says thank you to his Community Investor. Photo: Claudio Raschella, Credit Union Foundation of Australia (CUFA)

reduced the very real risk that participants would be too busy trying to seek an existence to attend the training or education workshops provided. Training encouraged skills in areas such as farming and care of livestock; trades such as motorbike and bicycle repair; basic literacy; and budgeting. These skills could be used in the longer term to improve the lives of the poorest. Meeting basic needs was therefore seen as necessary to the success of the larger, more sustainable development programs.

For some NGOs, material assistance involved providing farm animals or vegetables so families could be more self-sufficient. For others, it was to provide meals during the program, so that people did not also give up food when they did not go to the fields to work. In one instance, an NGO accompanied poor families to access government services, improving the confidence of participants and challenging community stigma and exclusion.

NGOs identified access to savings and credit as a critical factor for the sustainability of benefits. While banking services have become more common in most countries, the poorest and most marginalised usually have no property or other assets to use as collateral. This makes accessing credit to start a small business or to secure transportation or materials incredibly difficult. Four out of the six case studies used in this review provided credit in some way. The majority of people given credit were successful in generating a higher level of income for themselves and their families. They were also able to pay back the money they borrowed.

Long-term commitment to capacity building emerged as another central success factor. All of the case studies showed that gaining the confidence of the poorest and encouraging participation in development activities takes time, sometimes years. All of the case studies highlighted that NGOs and their programs are more effective when they take time to build trust, maintain grassroots level contacts, build genuine relationships with local partners and with the poor, and put in upfront effort to foster local ownership.



One case study highlighted that it has taken ten years to achieve real results in this area. The same organisation had observed that leaving a community too early can undo many years of hard work. While a decade might seem to be a long time to invest in a community, the economic benefit from improving the social and economic status of the poorest and most marginalised is significant, particularly where the poorest can establish financial independence.

The review found that NGOs that specifically chose to work with the poorest and most marginalised did so because they were committed to supporting those whose rights were not being met. NGOs were realistic, however, that their capacity to improve the lives of the poorest was limited by existing community attitudes and government policies and practice. To deliver long-term improvements, development activities had to address both the basic needs of the poorest and the responsibility of governments and the community as a whole to meet the needs of marginalised groups.

The review found that even though NGOs were aware of how important creating an environment for changing attitudes at a national or local level was, it did not feature as a priority in ANCP programs. NGOs have noted that if they were to pay more attention to creating a more inclusive development environment, they would need to move resources away from services to the poorest to advocacy and policy instead. The review found that this is an area that warrants further investigation and reflection by all partners involved in the ANCP.

Next Steps

The findings of this review will contribute to the new Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Framework for the ANCP and the development of a new Agency-wide monitoring and evaluation approach set out in the CSEF, as well as lessons for continual improvement in the aid program. For example, AusAID and NGOs could consider if ANCP projects would benefit from closer connections to mainstream Australian aid programs in specific countries, in order to use learnings together with local and government partners to encourage more inclusive development.

AusAID and NGOs are collecting data over 2012 for the first report on ANCP evaluations. This will reveal some of the quality of ANCP program outcomes and give us an understanding of the overall impact of the program. Findings will also feed into the next thematic review, scheduled to start in 2013.

This woman has received training on how to weave fabric as part of Plan's Empowering Families project in Cambodia. Photo: Plan International Australia (Plan)



Thanks

The Thematic Review relied on the active and willing participation of Australian NGOs involved in the ANCP. We thank all of the NGOs that volunteered case studies and participated in the learning events to generate this review.

In particular, AusAID recognises the time and effort of the six organisations that were selected as case study partners for this review:

APHEDA—Union Aid Abroad: *Literacy and Vocational Skills Training, East Timor*

Assisi Aid Projects Australia (Assisi): *Self Help Groups for Women, Tamil Nadu, India*

Caritas Australia (Caritas): *Bridges of Hope Program, Phnom Penh, Cambodia*

Credit Union Foundation of Australia (CUFA): *Building Institutional Capacity (BIC) Project, 14 provinces in Cambodia*

Plan International Australia (Plan): *Empowering Families project, Siem Reap Province, Cambodia*

Quaker Service Australia (QSA): *Permaculture Skills Training with Rural Poor and Disabled people, Kampong Thom and Pursat Provinces, Cambodia*

AusAID also thanks ACFID, particularly the ACFID Development Practice Committee, for their support of the ANCP Review process and encouragement to NGOs to be involved.

A full copy of the Review can be found on the AusAID website:

<http://www.ausaid.gov.au/publications/pages/ancp-2011-thematic-review.aspx>

Cover image: This mother whose husband died five years ago and who is also HIV+ lives on government concession land in Cambodia. Through Caritas Australia's Bridges of Hope program, she is receiving assistance to address physical and psychological health issues and to learn livelihood skills which help her earn an income and maintain independence. Photo: Caritas Australia



These icons symbolise the Millennium Development Goals—eight goals representing an agreement by world leaders to reduce poverty and enhance human development by 2015.

More information about the goals is available online at www.ausaid.gov.au/keyaid/mdg.cfm