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**Are donor harmonisation initiatives a good investment
in improved aid effectiveness?**

The Cambodia Quadripartite Initiative

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The opinions expressed in this case study are the author's alone,
and do not represent the official views of the organisers of
the Asian Regional Forum on Aid Effectiveness

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1. Introduction

1. This report is a component of a thematic case study considering how donor harmonisation initiatives have helped to promote the Paris Declaration principles and commitments.
2. This study assesses the joint country planning process conducted by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank in Cambodia (known as the "Quadripartite Initiative"). The four donors decided to conduct elements of their country planning process jointly, in order to increase the strategic alignment of their programmes and save transaction costs for Government. The Quadripartite Initiative produced a common strategic framework, to guide their individual country strategies.
3. This case study is based on a review of existing literature and interviews with key donor, Government and civil society stakeholders during a week-long visit to Cambodia in July 2006. A draft of the case study has been reviewed by government and donor stakeholders, and every effort has been made to reflect their views in the case study. However, the opinions expressed in this case study are the author's alone, and do not reflect the views of the organisers of or participants at the Manila Forum.
4. This case study will be combined with a study of a similar joint planning process in Bangladesh, and of an innovate multi-donor initiative, the Decentralisation Support Facility, in Indonesia, for presentation at Manila.

2. Context

5. Cambodia emerged from a generation of conflict at 'year zero' in terms of physical, human and institutional capital, and its development challenges are still dominated by this legacy. Since donors reengaged in the 1990s, assistance has focused on the rehabilitation of infrastructure, the restoration of basic social services and the reconstruction of state institutions. There has been steady economic growth, averaging over 7% *per annum* over the past decade, driven mainly by the garment and tourist industries.¹ This has led to a steady reduction in the numbers living below the national poverty line, to 35% in 2004 down from an estimated 47% a decade earlier.² However, growth in agriculture has lagged behind the rest of the region, leaving large numbers of people in rural areas still trapped in poverty.
6. Cambodia is a heavily aid dependent country. In 2005, it received some US\$525 million in official development assistance (ODA), representing nearly half of total public resources.³ Most development activities are ODA-financed.
7. Cambodia presents a challenging environment in which to deliver aid effectively. ODA management capacity across the administration is weak, and basic government systems, particularly in public financial management (PFM), have had to be constructed

¹ World Bank, "Cambodia: Halving Poverty by 2015? Poverty Assessment 2006", Phnom Penh, February 2006, p. vii.

² *Ibid.*, p. i.

³ Cambodian Rehabilitation and Development Board, "Development Cooperation Report: 2004 and 2005", Phnom Penh, February 2006.

from the ground up. The administration is fragmented, reflecting the complex political environment.

8. This challenging environment has led to a history of poor aid practices in Cambodia. Donors have relied heavily on stand-alone projects and foreign technical advisers to deliver their assistance, which has had distorting effects on the development of Cambodian institutions. The quality of technical assistance (TA) has come in for particular criticism. Foreign advisers have been used to perform basic government functions, without clear capacity-building strategies. Poorly designed and coordinated assistance has made it much more difficult for the Government to establish effective leadership of the development agenda. As one World Bank report put it, poor aid practices and the weak governance environment have “co-evolved” over the past decade.⁴

9. Relationships between donors have at times been very poor. The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has often struggled to resolve conflicting advice from different partners. In the early 2000s, the ADB and the World Bank produced separate poverty assessments and supported different poverty-reduction strategies.

10. Since the late 1990s, RGC and its development partners have made a concerted effort to improve aid effectiveness in Cambodia. At the 4th Consultative Group meeting in Paris in 2000, the RGC outlined a ‘new partnership paradigm’ for ODA management in Cambodia, nominating a single focal point for ODA coordination and articulating a set of principles to guide the development partnership. Various structures were established among donors, and between donors and RGC, to improve harmonisation and alignment and establish a more coherent policy dialogue. In 2004, RGC established a Government-Donor Coordination Committee (GDCC) as a forum for dialogue on development policy and aid effectiveness, plus a structure of 18 Technical Working Groups (TWGs) in key sectors and thematic areas. A Declaration on Harmonisation and Alignment was signed by RGC and 12 donors in December 2004, localising the commitments from the Rome Declaration, and a similar Declaration was prepared following the Paris Declaration. Cambodia has also been an active participant in global fora on aid effectiveness, and served as a pilot country for a number of OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) initiatives. In 2006, the RGC produced the National Strategic Development Plan 2006-2010 (NSDP), which synthesises and unifies the country’s various development plans and strategies, creating a single framework to which external assistance can be aligned. RGC has also invested significant efforts into building up its ODA management capacity.

11. There have also been a number of initiatives from the donor side to increase the coherence and harmonisation of ODA. The donors meet together each month for informal donor lunches, to discuss topical issues. The European Union member states have produced a Roadmap for Harmonisation, and produce joint positions on various topics. The World Bank, ADB, Japan and the French bank AFD have worked with the Ministry of Economy and Finance to produce Standard Operating Procedures for the management of loan-financed projects, setting out harmonised procurement and financial management requirements. The use of joint programming has increased, particularly in strategic areas such as PFM and public administration reform.

⁴ World Bank, “Cambodia: Halving Poverty by 2015? Poverty Assessment 2006”, Phnom Penh, February 2006, p. 168.

12. These efforts at harmonisation and alignment have resulted in significant improvements in the quality of the development partnership and the effectiveness of ODA in Cambodia. Nonetheless, there remain concerns on both sides that the negative dynamics of the past have not been entirely overcome.

3. The Quadripartite Initiative

3.1 Objectives

13. In December 2002, staff at ADB, DFID and the World Bank determined that all three agencies were about to embark on the preparation of new country strategies. To take advantage of this coincidence of timing, the proposal was made at country level to conduct elements of the planning process jointly. Following a period of discussion between the country offices and their respective headquarters, work on the joint planning process began in July 2003, and continued over the next 18 months. In June 2004, the UN group of 15 agencies, represented by the UN Resident Coordinator, joined the process, creating the Quadripartite Initiative.

14. There was no explicit process of identifying the benefits or estimating the costs of the exercise in advance. All four agencies were committed at the corporate level to greater harmonisation, and recognised the need for substantial improvements in donor coordination in the Cambodian context. They saw the Quadripartite Initiative as an opportunity to take forward the harmonisation agenda, leading by example.

15. They recognised that there was some potential for greater strategic alignment of the four country programmes, although overlap was not considered to be a major problem. More importantly, they saw the Quadripartite Initiative as a measure for overcoming the relationship problems that had existed in the past among the multilaterals, in particular between ADB and the World Bank. One participant described it as “an olive branch” among the institutions.

16. It is also relevant that there was hiatus in Cambodian politics at the time. The process for forming a new government following the July 2003 elections stretched out for over a year, during which time no major policy dialogue was taking place. This gave the partners additional time to pursue the Quadripartite Initiative.

3.2 Scope of the Quadripartite Initiative

17. The Quadripartite Initiative was not intended to produce a joint country strategy. The four agencies went on to produce separate assistance strategies. The core of the Quadripartite Initiative was a joint analytical exercise, leading to a common understanding of the development context and the national policy environment, and a common risk assessment. An agreement was reached that the individual country strategies would contain the same text in these three areas. The four strategies can therefore be said to fit within a common strategic framework, based on an agreed set of high-level objectives and a common understanding of the challenges facing Cambodia.

18. The analytical work drew on various inputs that had already been prepared by the agencies. ADB and the World Bank had conducted a joint Fiduciary Review, together with separate private sector analyses. DFID contributed a Drivers of Change study. No

poverty assessment was available at the time, because reliable data was not available at that time.

19. From August to November 2003, there was an intense period of joint work between the three original agencies to collate these inputs and agree on a common analysis. Working groups were created to examine particular sectors and themes. Various retreats and meetings were held, in order for the partners to learn about each other's programmes and approaches, identify their comparative advantages, develop common understandings of specific issues and agree key outcomes and priority areas for the country strategies.

20. Drafting of the common analysis was described by all participants as a tortuous process, which stretched out over many months. ADB took the lead on the drafting, because it was most advanced in the process. However, the documents were extensively revised following consultation and debate among the partners. This intensive phase of the work was often frustrating for the participants, but in retrospect is considered to have been essential in building solid working relationships between the agencies and cementing institutional commitment to the process.

21. The participants chose to articulate a set of principles to guide their working relationship. These include commitments to:

- building a partnership based on trust and openness;
- joint working, based on shared knowledge;
- pursuing coordination and harmonisation in areas of common support;
- building on the comparative advantage of different donors;
- developing common messages for government;
- aligning to RGC priorities;
- building RGC capacity to lead;
- listening to RGC's policy agenda, and basing dialogue on that agenda;
- realistic expectations and a long-term perspective;
- exercising selectivity in programming decisions, focusing on areas where RGC commitment and ownership is established;
- developing a common understanding of incentives and institutions in each sector of engagement.

22. Many of these commitments have subsequently been articulated in general form between the RGC and its development partners.

23. Part of the analytical process was a series of stakeholder consultations with other donors, civil society and the private sector, conducted jointly by the partners over a 3-day period in October 2003. Follow-up sessions to obtain feedback on the analysis were conducted in October/November 2004.

24. When the UN joined the group in June 2004, the analytical process was substantially complete. The UN agreed not to revisit the analysis. By using the existing analytical framework, the UN was able to avoid producing its own Common Country Assessment, which is usually a required input for the UN's common country strategy, the Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF).

25. As the partners discussed their programmes and approaches, consensus emerged on comparative advantage across the agencies in different sectors, in particular between ADB and the World Bank whose programmes exhibited the most overlap. This allowed the two banks to identify areas where joint work could be strengthened, and to agree an informal division of roles in particular sectors or sub-sectors. For example, ADB agreed to move out of the health sector altogether, while the World Bank agreed to play a supporting role to ADB in education. ADB took informal leadership in agriculture, irrigation and natural resource management, while the World Bank took the lead in forestry and land reform. ADB focused more on the financial sector, while the World Bank led on private sector development.

26. To an extent, this division of labour was already apparent before the Quadripartite Initiative. However, the exercise helped the agencies to gain an appreciation of their respective strengths, which continues to inform strategic coordination and programming decisions. With some of the partners now under pressure from their headquarters to rationalise their country programmes, there is likely to be greater selectivity in the future, based on improved division of labour.

27. An attempt was made to develop a common set of monitoring indicators for the country programmes, but this was abandoned as impractical in light of the differences in composition of the four programmes.

3.3 *Future development*

28. There are no definite plans as to how the Quadripartite Initiative should continue into the future. While the partners anticipate a continuing relationship, they have deliberately chosen to keep the group informal. For example, they do not take public positions as a group on particular issues, but often consult with each other to coordinate their positions. There are examples of joint work among the partners, but these are not initiatives of the Quadripartite Group *per se*, and other donors are also involved. For example, as joint donor facilitators of the Technical Working Group on Planning and Poverty Reduction, the World Bank and UNDP coordinated comments on the draft NSDP across the donor community. Likewise, the four donors are engaged in joint work in areas such as public financial management reform and other capacity-building programmes, but these are organised through the Technical Working Group mechanism.

29. For the time being, the Quadripartite Initiative is lightly institutionalised, through a monthly meeting of the four heads of offices. These are informal meetings, used to share ideas on topical issues (such as the potential impact of Cambodia's discovery of oil). When there are important issues to be raised with Government, the heads of office sometimes agree among themselves which of the three multilateral agencies should take the initiative.

30. There are also joint retreats of the country teams once every six months to share experiences in programme implementation and refresh their common understanding of Cambodia's development challenges. The first of these, a single-day retreat involving around 40 staff members, took place in May 2006. The agencies presented their updated analysis on a range of issues, including the political context, economic trends, youth and education, human rights and the aid effectiveness agenda, and discussed the implications in a series of breakout sessions.

31. At the retreat, the partners discussed the future of the Quadripartite Initiative, but without coming to clear conclusions. The opportunity may not arise to repeat the joint planning process in the same form, as the planning cycles of the four partners have not been harmonised. As country leadership of the development agenda strengthens, through mechanisms such as the TWGs, there may be less need for separate, donor-led harmonisation exercises. However, for the time being, good strategic coordination among the major donors is still imperative. In addition, the partners see the need for greater selectivity in their country programmes in the future. This would indicate the need for some kind of common planning framework. This need is of course not limited to the Quadripartite Partners. However, in practice it is often easier for a smaller group of donors to take the initiative. The Quadripartite Initiative is a light and flexible structure that facilitates strategic coordination.

| Period of country strategies | | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------|-----------|
| Partner | Country strategy | Effective | Period |
| ADB | Country Strategy and Program | February 2005 | 2005-2009 |
| DFID | Country Assistance Plan | May 2005 | 2005-2008 |
| UN | UNDAF | March 2005 | 2006-2010 |
| WB | Country Assistance Strategy | May 2005 | 2005-2008 |

32. Furthermore, against the history of poor relations in Cambodia among the major multilaterals, the Quadripartite Initiative serves as a device for managing their relationship. Even in the Paris Declaration era, coordination among donors is strongly influenced by the quality of interpersonal relationships, and is prone to breaking down. Institutionalising the relationship makes it more robust, and more likely to be sustained through inevitable differences of opinion on particular issues.

33. However, while the Quadripartite Initiative will continue as a mechanism for strategic coordination and relationship management, it is recognised that joint work on specific issues should involve other donor partners whenever possible. The Quadripartite Initiative is therefore likely to become increasingly open-textured in nature.

4. Managing the process

34. There are a number of points to note about the process for initiating and managing the joint planning process.

35. The initiative was proposed at country level, in response to an opportunity which emerged fortuitously. It fitted the corporate agendas of the four partners, and at various points intervention from headquarters proved important for keeping the process on track. Nonetheless, the experience suggests that, while the commitment to aid effectiveness may be global in nature, it is usually up to country managers to identify concrete opportunities to move the agenda forward.

36. No clearly defined management structure was established to guide the initiative, and institutional arrangements were kept very light. The core of the initiative was a process of intensive joint working, which cemented relationships between the partners at multiple levels.

37. At the time the Quadripartite Initiative was first proposed, the aid effectiveness agenda in Cambodia was not well developed. There was no leadership from the Government during the hiatus that followed the July 2003 elections. The initiative was therefore clearly on the donor side, reflecting a view from the partners that action was needed to “start the ball rolling” on harmonisation and alignment.

38. Since then, Government leadership of the aid effectiveness agenda has strengthened considerably. The Government and donors have agreed an Action Plan on Harmonisation and Alignment (December 2004),⁵ and a formal structure for dialogue on aid effectiveness has been established. Government has subsequently acknowledged the value of the process, and has encouraged the development of further joint assistance strategies among donors.⁶ However, some observers on the donor side are of the view that, as Government leadership of the development agenda strengthens, the goal of achieving greater strategic coordination among the donors can be achieved through other means – for instance, by closer alignment of programmes with the NSDP, and through participation in sectoral planning processes and coordination mechanisms.

39. It is likely that the Quadripartite Initiative will evolve to reflect this changing environment, although what form it will take in the future is not yet clear. The lesson of the Quadripartite Initiative is not that it represents general best practice in country planning, but that it was an appropriate response to particular set of country conditions.

40. The partners reflect that their institutional rules and procedures facilitate collaboration on analytical work, but that moving to joint programming is more difficult. There were therefore limits to the degree of harmonisation possible within the joint planning exercise. Nonetheless, all agree that pooling knowledge, sharing expertise and developing a common understanding of the country context is a very effective way of increasing the strategic alignment of donor programmes.

41. The process of preparing the common analytical framework proved to be extremely time intensive and at times frustrating for the partners. There were points in the process when the relationship came close to breaking down. Changes of personnel were also quite disruptive. These difficulties were probably inevitable. External facilitation helped at various points. Intervention from HQ staff also proved important, to remind the country teams how much was at stake, both for each agency corporately and for the aid effectiveness agenda in Cambodia. In the end, all of the partners were glad that they had managed to work through the difficulties, and came to see the process as having been essential in developing mutual understanding and cementing a long-term relationship.

5. Costs and benefits

42. The costs of the Quadripartite Initiative are rated by the partners as extremely high – as much as twice the time and effort as would have been needed for separate planning processes. If this effort is understood purely as a transaction cost, then it is quite likely that the core outputs – a shared country analysis and risk assessment – could have been achieved in a less costly fashion.

⁵ Now revised as the Action Plan on Harmonisation, Alignment and Results (March 2006).

⁶ RGC, National Operational Guidelines for Development Cooperation Grant Assistance, March 2006. p. 7.

43. Nonetheless, the partners do not see the efforts expended purely as transaction costs. Rather, they acknowledge that this period of intensive joint working was extremely important in building up mutual knowledge and understanding and cementing relationships. This was an investment in overcoming the poor relations of the past. In a sense, the process itself was the whole point, and cannot be reduced to a simple cost-benefit analysis.

44. Now that the joint planning exercise is complete, the on-going transaction costs of maintaining the relationship among the partners – biannual team meetings, monthly heads of office lunches, various working level contacts – are very light.

45. Over the longer term, there should be further cost savings as the partners increase the selectivity of their programmes, based on an agreed division of labour. There should also be increases in development effectiveness, as the four agencies coordinate better at the strategic level and engage in joint or coordinated advocacy on key policy priorities.

46. There were some costs to the process in terms of relationships with other donors. The Japanese in particular had some concerns about the wisdom of pursuing harmonisation among a small group of donors. Japanese observers pointed out that, with the emergence of the NSDP as a framework for alignment and the Government's emphasis on developing programme-based approaches, coordinated planning can now be organised through the Government-led TWGs. For these reasons, they considered the Quadripartite Initiative to be an "outdated" mode of harmonisation.

47. The Government has welcomed the Quadripartite Initiative, and has called for more use of joint country strategies among donors. The National Operational Guidelines for Development Cooperation Grant Assistance (March 2006) list the benefits as:

- “enhance joint programming by development partners in close consultations with national stakeholders;
- reduce administrative burdens on the Government;
- allocate responsibilities and program components in accordance with each development partner's comparative strength;
- eliminate duplication and overlap of development partner support; and
- optimize the provision of resources to a sector or national program.”

48. There were some modest cost savings to Government during the planning process itself, in the form of reduced time spent on consultation. There may be additional benefits to Government from improved coordination among the partners. The Government values being able to conduct a single policy dialogue with partners, rather than separate bilateral dialogues. The donors participate more effectively in Government-led structures and processes, such as the GDCC and the TWGs, if they coordinate their position in advance. The Quadripartite Initiative is one mechanism for accomplishing this strategic coordination.

6. Impact assessment

49. The partners assess the impact of the Quadripartite Initiative as modest, but significant.

50. Perhaps the single greatest impact of the Quadripartite Initiative was repairing relations among the three major multilaterals. In the past, external assistance to Cambodia has been marred by poor coordination, and even institutional rivalry, among donors. Over the period of the Quadripartite Initiative, this has changed dramatically. The habit of open communication has now become well established, in what amounts to a major change in behaviour.

51. Of course, much of the credit for this change goes to the Government. The effort it has put into unifying its development strategies through the NSDP, improving its ODA management capacity and building a coherent structure for policy dialogue has helped the donor community to improve its coherence. But the Quadripartite Initiative forms an important part of the story. It was a major step towards establishing better working relations among donors, at a time when Government leadership was lacking, and it had an important demonstration effect for Government and the wider donor community.

52. Relations among the partners, and with the wider donor community, are now viewed as much improved, but still vulnerable to various tensions. For this reason, there is clearly a value in maintaining the Quadripartite Initiative in its current, light form as a tool for managing the relationships.

53. The initiative made a contribution to greater coordination at programming level among the three major multilaterals. There was some progress towards greater selectivity and improved division of labour among the partners. The initiative did not accomplish major changes in individual country programmes. Programming decisions are still made separately by the partners, although with greater consultation than before. The weight of existing commitments in country programmes means that they necessarily change quite slowly. Nonetheless, the Quadripartite Initiative is assessed as a step in the right direction in terms of strategic coordination, which will continue to deliver benefits over time.

54. The Quadripartite Initiative has also helped to improve coordination at the strategic level. The donors are now working together much more effectively in a range of areas, particularly around support to the NSDP and horizontal reform processes like PFM. They are able to present unified messages to Government on key policy issues.

55. The aid effectiveness agenda in Cambodia has moved on considerably since 2003. Increasingly, coordination and joint programming will be organised through Government-led bodies, in particular the TWGs. The Government has encouraged these groups to begin the development of programme-based approaches (PBAs). Coordinated approaches among donors to support the emergence of simple forms of PBA are likely to be the core of the harmonisation and alignment agenda in the coming period. In this environment, there may not be a need to repeat the joint planning initiative.

56. However, there is still a need for donor-to-donor structures to manage and coordinate inputs into Government-led bodies and processes. The better organised the donors are at a strategic level, the better they are able to support Government efforts to lead the development agenda.

7. Lessons learned

57. There are a number of lessons from the Quadripartite Initiative that may be of relevance to future harmonisation initiatives.

58. When the aid effectiveness agenda is still at an early stage, it can be useful for a small group of donors to take the lead with specific harmonisation initiatives, designed to demonstrate the potential and value of greater harmonisation to Government and other donors. As the country's willingness and capacity to lead the aid effectiveness agenda develops, these stand-alone harmonisation initiatives should evolve to suit the changing circumstances.

59. In its earliest phase, the aid effectiveness agenda in any given country needs to be pragmatic and opportunity-driven. It usually falls to country managers to spot opportunities for improved relationships and joint working. They need encouragement and support from their institutions to be able to respond to these opportunities.

60. There are advantages to pursuing harmonisation among small groups of donors, but there are also relationship costs vis-à-vis non-participating donors. Both need to be taken into consideration.

61. Government-led structures for policy dialogue work best where donors work together to coordinate their inputs and messages. This may involve continuing with donor-to-donor structures, in parallel to Government-led processes.

62. Selectivity, complementarity and improved division of labour are emerging as increasingly important objectives. Government welcomes greater specialisation among donors, because it reduces transaction costs and increases the quality of technical inputs. Donors are increasingly finding that the high costs of effective partnership working are forcing greater selectivity in country programming. However, country programmes are proving slow to change, owing to the weight of existing commitments. Division of labour should therefore be a major focus of attention in the coming period.

63. Strong working relationships among the donors are fundamental to effective assistance. A period of intensive working around a particular objective – in this case the joint planning process – helped to increase mutual knowledge and trust and cement solid working relationships. These process benefits may in fact be the most important result of the Quadripartite Initiative.

64. Joint analytical work to develop a common knowledge base among donors is a powerful tool for building working relationships and increasing strategic alignment.

65. Donor relationships are still strongly influenced by the quality of interpersonal relationships among the individuals involved. There is a clear value to structuring the relationships among donors to make them more robust.

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