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Helping Accelerate Poverty Reduction in Asia and the Pacific

CAPACITY BUILDING FOR THE TONLE SAP POVERTY REDUCTION INITIATIVE

The Tonle Sap Initiative in Cambodia, launched by ADB in 2002, provides a framework for long-term engagement and a geographically and temporally sequenced series of investments to meet the poverty and environmental challenges of the Tonle Sap. In support of this, technical assistance 4376 was aimed at building the capacity to manage, engage in, and support this initiative at the national, provincial, and local levels.

The Tonle Sap located in Cambodia, is the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia. It has a unique hydrology: in the rainy season, reverse inflow from the Mekong River causes the lake to swell fivefold to cover up to 16,000 square kilometers. Fish, reptiles, birds, mammals, and plants thrive on this phenomenon, making the Tonle Sap an environmental hotspot of regional and worldwide importance (now a designated United Nations Biosphere Reserve), and a major source of protein for the people of the lower Mekong basin. However, population and development pressures are taking their toll and consumptive use of natural capital is intense.

An estimated 90% of the poor in Cambodia live in rural areas. The Tonle Sap region has the highest incidence of poverty in the country at around 38%. However, even this masks significant variations, with 40–60% of the population living on less than a dollar a day (in some areas this increases to around 80%).¹ An analysis of poverty from the perspectives of the poor,² carried out in 2000, found that the poorest people in rural areas had few, if any, assets such as land, animals, or adequate housing. The research indicated that the poor often relied on natural resources such as forests and fishing grounds.

The Tonle Sap ecosystem is of increasing significance because:

- Around 1 million people live on and around the Tonle Sap, with livelihoods dependent on the resources available there, while the productive fisheries of the Tonle Sap are the main source of animal protein for much of the population of Cambodia.
- The Tonle Sap is an environmental area of global significance. It is a seasonal breeding and nursery ground and forage area for fish that subsequently migrate to the Mekong River, thus providing a regionally vital resource.
- The Tonle Sap region is experiencing growing conflict owing to population pressures, inequality of access to resources,

and lack of clarity over rights. Severe poverty, as well as migration and ethnic discrimination, are major contributing factors to tensions.

The Tonle Sap Initiative

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) recognizes the importance of the Tonle Sap ecosystem and made it central to its assistance program to Cambodia. This is evidenced in the poverty partnership agreement that the Government of Cambodia and ADB agreed on as the basis of ADB's country strategy. The Tonle Sap Initiative, launched by ADB in 2002, provides a framework for long-term engagement and a geographically and temporally sequenced series of investments to meet the poverty and environmental challenges of the Tonle Sap.

The Tonle Sap Basin Strategy sets priorities for planning assistance over the next 5–10 years. It is based on three underpinning principles: sustainable livelihoods, social justice, and a basin-wide approach.

ADB's support to the Tonle Sap is a departure for the organization, focusing in large measure on building capacity to both reduce poverty and meet environmental challenges. The Tonle Sap Initiative is envisaged as a series of significant investments in the form of grant or loan projects to facilitate:

- Pro-poor, sustainable economic growth;
- Access to assets; and,
- Management of natural resources and the environment.

The Tonle Sap Initiative and the Tonle Sap Basin Strategy that guides it are to be implemented principally through four large-scale projects from ADB, allied to and informed by numerous smaller project preparatory and advisory technical assistance projects. The four pillars that frame the Tonle Sap Initiative over an 8-year period are:

- The Tonle Sap Environmental Management Project (\$19.4 million),
- The Tonle Sap Sustainable Livelihoods Project (\$19.7 million),
- The Tonle Sap Lowland Stabilization Project which is still under development and
- The Tonle Sap Watershed Management Project which is at the planning stage.

The phasing of interventions, which move from the core areas of the lake to the watersheds, ensures that each project is informed by and feeds into another, thus promoting continuity and building synergies. ADB intends to repeat this cycle as may be needed to build on accomplishments and embed lessons learned from the first iteration. All the while, crosscutting themes ensure that attention is paid to vulnerable groups, governance, resource cooperation, and the private sector.

Building Capacity for Implementation

In 2004, support for technical assistance to build the capacity of institutions working around the lake was sought from the PRF. The purpose of TA 4376 was to build the capacity to manage, engage in, and support the Tonle Sap Initiative at the national, provincial, and local levels.

TA 4376 focused on three elements:

- Capacity building for institutions and communities working in natural resource management;
- Information sharing at the national level; and,
- Development of partnerships between government, nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and civil society organizations to support the initiative.

TA 4376 worked primarily at the commune and community levels to begin to build a basic understanding of the policies and approaches that the Government has developed in community-based natural resource management.

Initial delays in implementing TA 4376 provided an opportunity to reflect on how these elements should best be achieved. This has led to a change of emphasis away from using established regional expertise to working with locally based organizations. A local NGO, the Community-Based Natural Resource Management Learning Institute (CBNRM-LI), was chosen for the capacity-building work because of its skills and implementation in the field, particularly at the community level and for its extensive network of contacts with NGOs and with the local government. It was decided to base the Tonle Sap Resource Centre, the main element of national information sharing, with the Cambodia Development Research Institute, an internationally recognized research body.

Capacity Building for Institutions

Several agencies have supported the development of community-level natural resource management institutions in the Tonle Sap area, beginning with the Food and Agriculture Organization in the 1990s and then by means of various operating outputs of the Tonle Sap Initiative, such as the Tonle Sap Environmental

Management Project. TA 4376 worked actively to support the development of community-based organizations by building skills and awareness.

This component of TA 4376 was implemented by CBNRM-LI, which:

- Carried out 57 courses in the six provinces around the lake. This has included over 1,000 participants, majority of whom work at the community level. The assessment of the courses and the follow-up carried out has shown an enthusiastic response from participants, and particularly from community leaders and resource management committee members.
- Worked in collaboration with local government departments and other NGOs and donors working in the area, enabling the support to complement existing initiatives in community-based natural resource management and, where particular needs are identified, to establish links for support for individuals and groups in the future.
- Carried out rigorous monitoring and have used these data to inform course content and delivery. This monitoring has enabled the development of a participant database, which enabled follow-up with individuals so that the impact of the training can be assessed. Again, this feeds back to course design as well as providing baseline data for an eventual endline evaluation.

The work in capacity building by CBNRM-LI has provided a strong platform for understanding the training needs at the community, commune, and province levels. This provided critical information to develop appropriate approaches to capacity building, ensuring that the needs at the local level were met. CBNRM-LI's work also contributed to the development of baseline information for assessing impact.

Information Sharing

TA 4376 leveraged information sharing by various instruments and methods to:

- Make data and information on the Tonle Sap Initiative and its operating outputs available at the international level; and,
- Make data and information available nationally to local organizations and researchers.

At the international level ample data and information on the Tonle Sap Initiative is available through ADB's own website¹ and the Tonle Sap Biosphere Reserve Environmental Information Database established under the Tonle Sap Environmental Management Project.²

The Cambodia Development Research Institute, a well-established local research body, now also houses a depository of data and information on operating outputs of the Tonle Sap Initiative in the Tonle Sap Initiative Resource Center set up there under TA 4376. The Tonle Sap Initiative Resource Center assembles data and information from various sources, including operating outputs of the Tonle Sap Initiative, and makes these available to researchers, government agencies, and other donors

at the national level. This national level resource complements the international information sharing.

Protecting Livelihoods and Biodiversity

One of the main achievements of TA 4376 has been in developing the capacity of institutions around the Tonle Sap. Those institutions that have participated are now able to implement community-based management of natural resources, whether fisheries, forestry, or more general land use. TA 4376 has also helped raise awareness of these approaches among government institutions as well as communities themselves.

TA 4376 has provided a valuable first phase of learning for the Tonle Sap Initiative as a whole. It has highlighted the capacity-building and knowledge needs of communities and the institutions that support them for better natural resource management on and around the lake. TA 4376 began the process of building institutions from the grassroots, developing approaches to meet local needs, and building networks of support.

The capacity-building work has demonstrated the need for work at the community level. TA 4376 also identified a need to make information more widely available across institutions. However, while a need exists, demand for this information sharing also needs to be understood more clearly if work in this area is to be a success.

Endnotes

- ¹ Asian Development Bank (ADB). 2002. Cambodia Operational Strategy Study, 2000.
- ² ADB. 2001. Participatory Poverty Assessment, 2001.
- ³ www.adb.org/Projects/Tonle_Sap/
- ⁴ www.tsbr-ed.org/en/default.asp

This case study was written by Social Development Direct (RETA Consultant) under the Regional TA 6270: Facilitating Knowledge Management for Pro-Poor Policies and Projects with inputs from Olivier Serrat, Project Officer of TA 4376, and Sonomi Tanaka, Senior Social Development Specialist, ADB. The views and assessments contained herein do not necessarily reflect the views of ADB or its Board of Directors or the governments they represent. ADB does not guarantee the accuracy of the data and accepts no responsibility for any consequences of their use.

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