

Dilemmas of a Mennonite Program Agency **Mennonite Central Committee Seeks to Find Its Niche in Cambodia**

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Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) has worked in Cambodia since 1981. MCC's role in Cambodia has evolved over the years, along with the ever-changing political and social situation.

From the beginning of MCC's presence in Cambodia, it has been necessary for program administrators to make difficult decisions as to MCC's appropriate role and profile. These decisions dealt with a large variety of issues. Cambodia's specific situation of having been devastated by years of bombing and the rule of the Khmer Rouge as well as by continuing war, and left isolated by the West, drove much of what MCC did during the early years. Other factors that were weighed as decisions were made over the years were MCC's identity as a Christian/Mennonite organization coupled with Cambodia's being a Buddhist society. To some, it appeared that MCC's decisions involved too many compromises. Others, while acknowledging the unusual nature of the situation, felt nonetheless that the decisions were prudently made, and appropriate for the circumstances.

Our term as MCC Country Representatives in Cambodia (1988-1993) coincided with intense political changes. Much of MCC's identity in Cambodia had already been established, and our challenge was to respond appropriately to the changing times in ways that were fitting for MCC. Decisions about MCC's role were often made in an ambiguous climate, an environment of constant socio-political change and shifting conditions, at times bordering on the chaotic. These changes were reflective of the larger, and increasingly ambiguous, world-wide geo-political picture, as the USSR dissolved and the Berlin wall collapsed.

MCC programs are viewed by the constituency as, by and large, being personnel intensive, relatively low-budget, working at the village level in a "person to person" way, and working to a large degree through church structures. During the 1980s, however, this did not define the MCC Cambodia Program. It was not until around 1990 that significant political changes began to take place in the country, which in turn began to allow for gradual changes in MCC Cambodia's program as well.

MCC Cambodia's history and the way it dealt with dilemmas faced in the Cambo-

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dian setting may be instructive to other program agencies in similar situations. Following are a number of themes that have affected MCC's presence and decision-making in Cambodia since work began in 1981. The interaction of these themes with MCC Cambodia's course is evident as one traces the program's history. The interdependence of these themes must be emphasized, since it would be misleading to consider them in isolation from one another.

MCC Cambodia programs beginning at Cambodia's "Year Zero"

In 1979 Cambodia was truly left "flat on its back." As a result of the disastrous rule of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge in which an estimated 20 percent of the population died, the country's infrastructure was shattered and the population thoroughly traumatized. Most of those Cambodians who had some professional training had either died or fled to the border. The term "Year Zero," commonly used to describe what things were like then, gives a sense that the country was starting from scratch.

On top of this Cambodia was denied the international development assistance and access to credit that would have been essential to getting it back on its feet again. To add to this impossible situation, the ongoing war against the Khmer Rouge-led guerrilla insurgency continued to sap what few resources the country had.

Because of the Western aid embargo in the 1980s, MCC's profile in Cambodia was fairly high, as was that of other non-governmental organizations (NGOs). MCC, having comparatively modest resources, nevertheless represented to the Cambodian government a significant chunk of the country's access to Western development assistance. For example, MCC's contribution to the Forestry Department's reforestation program was in the same neighborhood as what was being allocated by the national budget for reforestation.

These factors encouraged NGOs in the early years to develop uncharacteristically large-scale programs. The acute needs at the central infrastructural level determined the direction of NGO resources and attention. MCC Cambodia's budget was larger than MCC programs in most other countries (while having a comparably small expatriate MCC presence), primarily because the program was addressing such large-scale and capital-intensive needs that would not have been addressed otherwise.

To summarize, MCC Cambodia's programs have roughly evolved in the following manner and sequence:

1980-87: Relief assistance, including large shipments of rice seed, soap, canned beef, school and health kits, and clothing.

1982-1991: Addressing large infrastructural needs: building and repairing institutional buildings such as schools and hospitals, refurbishing soap factories, providing vehicles, providing large quantities of medicines and equipment.

1987-present: Training emphasis in all programs. Health staff are sent to India for training. Indian doctors and other expatriates came to work in Cambodia with training emphasis in mind. Cambodians from various sectors are sent to other countries in the region to receive further training and exposure.

1991-present: Working at a community level, with a participatory approach, as that

has been allowed.

1992-present: Working towards Cambodian-initiated and Cambodian-led activities as trained and experienced Cambodian staff became more a part of MCC programs.

MCC's identity as a reconciliatory presence in the face of the western aid embargo

As mentioned above, Cambodia was subjected to an intense US-led international embargo on aid and commerce through most of the 1980s and into the early 1990s. In essence, the embargo was an indirect attempt to punish Viet Nam, which was backing the Cambodian government during the 1980s. The government of Cambodia, and the Cambodian people, were non-entities in the eyes of all Western governments. Through the 1980s, MCC's presence, along with only a handful of other such organizations, comprised the sum total of Western aid coming to Cambodia.

Thus, from the beginning, MCC's presence in Cambodia was a symbolic act of reconciliation. MCC's identity as an American NGO in a country that the US was ignoring made a statement to the Cambodians and to the US government. To Cambodians it said we were standing with them in spite of our government's policies. To the US government it said that in spite of the harsh policy of embargo, resulting in difficult licensing procedures to discourage program activities in Cambodia, MCC would not ignore the Cambodian people. It said that our government's policies do not determine our Christian sense of service. During those years of embargo, MCC Cambodia tried to take an active role in raising awareness among MCC and other constituencies about Cambodia's isolation.

The recent changes in Cambodia have altered the context for this symbolism. The embargo has ended. There is now a recognized government in place. MCC is now one of a more than 100 foreign aid agencies in Cambodia.

The symbolic importance of MCC's presence in Cambodia has become less relevant, while opportunities for MCC Cambodia to define itself in other ways have multiplied.

Working with government restrictions placed on foreigners

The centrally organized and controlled nature of Cambodia during much of the 1980s, following the Marxist-Leninist model, caused the working environment for foreigners and Cambodians to be oppressive. Government restrictions on foreigners severely curtailed connections foreigners could make with Cambodians.

Apart from occasional stilted encounters, expatriates were not allowed to have meaningful contacts with rural Cambodians. Conversations with Cambodian civilians, apart from official ministry contacts, were viewed with suspicion. Secret police could periodically be seen across the street from the MCC office, keeping track of the comings and goings. Cambodians with no official role with NGOs were harassed by the secret police if seen associating frequently with foreigners.

All Westerners were restricted to living in three designated hotels, to ensure that

they would have as little unmonitored contact with Cambodians as possible.

Official government permission had to be obtained for any travel outside of Phnom Penh. This permission sometimes took up to two weeks to procure. Trips to the provinces could be made only with a guide from one of the ministries, who was required to make a report of each trip. Until 1988, foreigners were not allowed to drive their own vehicles.

Westerners were not permitted to study the Khmer language full-time in-country, and were obligated to get official government permission to study with a Khmer tutor even part-time.

During the early years of MCC's presence in Cambodia, the only NGO workers allowed resident visas were the country representatives. This put great restriction on how personnel-intensive MCC could be in Cambodia, putting yet another crimp in the supposedly "personnel-intensive" nature of MCC. Not until 1988 were long-term expatriate field workers allowed in Cambodia.

These restrictions resulted in a paucity of relationships between MCCers and Cambodian civilians and made some constituency wonder why MCC was in Cambodia in the first place.

The tight conditions described above have changed rapidly since 1990. As a result, possibilities for MCCers relating meaningfully with Cambodians at all levels have opened up tremendously. This relaxation of restrictions on foreigners has made it easier for MCC to work in a relationship-intensive manner, and to work through and with local initiatives. These relationships with Cambodians from all walks of life/all sectors of society now provide the grounding for MCC's presence and work in Cambodia.

The position of NGOs, including MCC, in relation to the Cambodian government

MCC's obligation during the 1980s to work entirely through government channels raised eyebrows among some of the MCC constituency. Being so entirely beholden to and dependent on the power structures in the country did not seem right to many. This was a legitimate concern, and one that has led to some soul-searching among MCCers over the years.

In the face of Cambodia's isolation, and in the absence of the possibility of meaningful contacts with Cambodian villagers, some of these government officials became valued friends, and in this way relationships were always a priority for MCC representatives.

At the same time, it seemed MCCers were not always getting a clear picture of what the real needs were in the countryside, something essential for MCC's approach to development. Because MCC had consented to work through the government, we approached development in a rather „top-down“ fashion. We depended primarily on government officials to define the needs of Cambodian people.

It was never entirely clear how much of MCC's assistance was being used to repay political favors or to satisfy other biases. Nor could MCC workers be entirely

sure how much of the funds and materials provided were actually getting to where they were intended.

As political conditions in Cambodia have changed, MCC workers have adjusted their relationships accordingly, with a process of disengagement—moving away from the center. This process hasn't always been easy.

The arrival of more and larger outside aid agencies has decreased the previously ready access MCC had to high officials. Thus some of this progression of moving from the center has happened automatically. MCC has moved toward the periphery, toward programs involving local and indigenous non-governmental initiatives, a more comfortable and „MCC-like“ position. Decisions about program have increasingly involved local people.

MCC's identity as a Christian/Mennonite NGO

In the early 1980s, MCC was one of only 15 NGOs working in Cambodia. All NGO workers were housed in one hotel. The isolation imposed on Cambodia provided NGOs with a strong sense of common purpose. These factors served to make the community close-knit, albeit quite segregated from the average Cambodian.

The restrictions on how NGOs were allowed to work, coupled with the immediate needs at the central levels that weren't being addressed because of the aid embargo, served to give all NGOs a fairly uniform and „mainstream“ profile in Cambodia. In terms of their approach to the needs that they faced, and in spite of diverse orientations and mandates, NGOs blended together. There was no significant difference between the work of ones that were church-based and those that were not. All worked primarily with the central structures, usually through high government officials and in a high-profile way. All NGOs spent large budgets (by usual standards), and had limited access to relationships with Cambodians. There was no possibility to place field workers in project areas. Therefore country representatives monitored projects by frequent visits. Overarching all of this was a sense of solidarity in the common symbolic reason for being in Cambodia.

MCC representatives during this period undoubtedly reflected what MCC as an organization tries to stand for. However, the space within which the MCC representatives could maneuver was extremely confined, and this limited correspondingly how fully MCC's character could be expressed.

Now, with the political changes in the country the NGO numbers have exploded. Living in hotels is a thing of the past, and the NGO cohesiveness has greatly decreased. In this context, MCC is trying to find and redefine its niche. This task hasn't been an easy one, and MCC's history in the country, while providing a firm basis from which to work, has sometimes felt like an impediment to finding this niche. Certain expectations and relationships, rooted in over 10 years of work, do not change readily.

What should be our unique character as a Christian development agency representing the Mennonite and BIC constituency, „In the name of Christ“? Issues brought to mind by such a question include MCC's relationship with the Cambodian church,

how to express and share our faith, what a „ministry of presence“ means in the Cambodian context, moving from working primarily with government officials to working with those who are more marginalized, etc.

MCC's relationship with the Cambodian Christian church

MCC's relationship with the Cambodian Christian church was, until 1990, mostly nonexistent. The Cambodian church was legalized only in 1990. Any kind of meaningful contact with the church was difficult and, in fact, illegal before this time. Although legalization of the church didn't change things overnight, since 1990 there has been a gradually increasing access to the church on the part of foreigners.

The church in Cambodia has had a history of being strongly influenced by foreigners, to the detriment of developing its own unique brand of Cambodian Christianity. MCCers have also been mindful of the disproportionate influence outsiders with access to financial resources can wield, particularly in a church as young and small as the Cambodian church. MCC has tried to play a supportive role to Cambodian Christians, while encouraging them to be guided by their own reading of scripture and by God as they seek out their identity as Cambodian Christians.

MCCers are actively seeking out relationships with Cambodian Christians and finding ways to encourage believers in several Cambodian churches. At the same time, MCCers have chosen not to take a leadership role in the worship services. MCC has only recently begun providing modest financial support to various activities of the church, including leadership development seminars and church-initiated social welfare projects.

MCC's relationship with the local Buddhist culture and structures

Because Cambodia is a predominantly Buddhist society, the Buddhist structure and rhythms of life form an integral part of the life of local communities. The influence of Buddhism varies from person to person in Cambodia (as does the influence of Christianity in a «Christian country») from being merely a cultural accoutrement for some to being a cherished belief system and profoundly-felt way of life for others. Either way, its practices have a penetrating influence on the rural communities, and this influence is a fact of life in Cambodia. It has therefore been necessary to reflect on, adapt to and develop an appreciation for the role of Buddhism as MCC works with the communities.

MCC Cambodia, in principle, is committed to working with both Christian and Buddhist organizations and individuals whose concerns for the welfare of Cambodians mesh with ours. But in reality there has continued to be disagreement on the MCC team about how this principle should or should not be implemented in the MCC Cambodia programs.

Schools are often in the pagoda compound. The pagoda often provides the most logical central gathering place in the community. The monks are generally well-respected by the community, and provide leadership in community projects. In some

cases, therefore, MCCers have made cooperation with local Buddhist leaders a priority for their work.

Other MCCers elect to steer clear of the pagoda systems, choosing, for example, not to install wells in the pagoda area so as not to project the image that MCC is legitimizing Buddhism. They reason, too, that there are many other equally-deserving and appropriate areas where wells can be constructed.

Summary and reflections

To summarize, these have been some of the dilemmas MCC has had to face in the Cambodian situation:

Prior to 1990, were MCC administrators being irresponsible as they worked in a situation that required such striking modifications of MCC's usual mode of operating? Or was there a deeper level of faithfulness, to the MCC vision and ultimately to God, in deciding to work in such a setting and in such a way?

Should MCC have refused to work under the restrictions the Cambodian government placed on us, and therefore sacrificed the possibility of working in Cambodia until such restrictions were lifted? When is it necessary and appropriate to alter MCC's usual mode of operating for the sake of being a reconciliatory presence? What might these «alterations» mean for MCC's role and how MCC is perceived in Cambodia in the future?

How has MCC's presence during the 1980s indicating some support of the previous government, affected our image in the current situation?

How involved should MCC be in providing financial assistance to the activities of the Cambodian church, given the potential to offend the Buddhist majority by perceived favoritism to adherents of a «foreign» religion, and the potential to create dependencies at a crucial point in the young church's maturation?

How involved should MCC be in supporting activities centering on the Buddhist pagoda, in light of its centrality to the life in most Cambodian villages? Should we take our cues primarily or solely from Cambodian Christians?

These kinds of dilemmas are undoubtedly faced by program agencies elsewhere, and must be evaluated squarely and honestly. Given the deepening ideological, social, and class divisions prevailing in the world, Christian agencies such as MCC shouldn't shy away from these dilemmas. Rather they must be prepared to make the necessary difficult decisions and to move ahead in their programs in spite of the ambiguities, seeking to breach the political, cultural and social barriers that divide people.

