

# Action for Environment and Communities (AEC)

External Evaluation  
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## **Abbreviations**

ADHOC	Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association
AEC	Action for Environment and Communities
AGPA	Asean Grassroots People's Assembly
BCV	Building Community Voices
CCD	Community Capacities for Development
CCFC	Coalition of Cambodia Farmers Community
CGPA	Cambodian Grassroots People's Assembly
CYN	Cambodian Youth Network
LICADHO	Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights
SADP	Southeast Asia Development Program (now merged with The McKnight Foundation)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

## **Acknowledgments**

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## Introduction

Action for Environment and Communities is a small NGO working in two districts in Kampong Chhnang (Boribor and Teuk Phos) and one district in Pursat (Krakor). It was established in 2001, and has been registered with the Ministry of Interior since 2005. AEC's mission is to help people living in poverty in the rural areas to improve their lives through advocacy, capacity building, and livelihood development. AEC accomplishes its mission with the active participation of local communities themselves, and the cooperation of a few local authorities and relevant organizations.

AEC's organizational goals are to: build awareness, empower women, build the capacities of communities to develop themselves, protect natural resources and the environment, help people with disabilities and without means of support, and protect human rights.

AEC has developed five programs to meet its goals:

- women empowerment;
- youth empowerment;
- community organizing;
- climate change and environmental issues; and
- livelihood development

This is AEC's second evaluation, and follows an evaluation conducted in 2009. The Terms of Reference for the evaluation lists the objectives of the evaluation as:

1. Documenting in an objective way the impact that AEC has had to date;
2. Providing AEC with an exit strategy and lessons learned, and financial management;
3. Providing AEC's donors and potential donors a frank, objective picture of the quality of AEC's work and its management; and
4. Providing a document which AEC and its supporting organizations can use to develop plans to improve the work of AEC and its management.

The consultant was specifically requested to look into:

- The impact AEC's work (in all programs) has had thus far;
- The effectiveness of AEC's work (in all programs) with communities and recommendations for how to improve its work;
- AEC's effectiveness in helping communities link to broader movements and influencing advocacy at higher levels; and
- The quality and appropriateness of AEC's management and its strength as an institution, and recommendations for how to improve management of AEC.

The evaluation team reviewed internal documents and reports of AEC, and designed a questionnaire for interviewing key stakeholders. A field visit to Kampong Chhnang and Pursat was conducted from 30 July to 2 August, and again on 5 August 2013. During this field visit, the evaluation team met with representatives from all the villages that AEC has worked with, as well as with AEC staff and NGO partners based in Kampong Chhnang and Pursat. Partners and donors based in Phnom Penh were then interviewed from 6-9 August 2013. A list of documents reviewed is included as Annex A, and a list of persons interviewed is included as Annex B.

Unfortunately, the evaluation team was unable to meet with a few key partners (Day Ku Akpiwat, Cambodia Peace Network, Sor Sor Troung and Environmental and Health Education, as well as Board member Mr. Chhim Van Deth, and donor Oxfam/Novib), who were not in Phnom Penh during the time set aside for interviews and could not be reached.

## **Findings and Recommendations**

### ***Community Organizing and Development***

#### Approach

AEC has a good approach to working with the communities in that unlike other NGOs, AEC does not use financial support as an incentive to encourage community members to participate in its activities. AEC encourages the communities to use community funds for its activities. Only one out of six communes visited requested money from AEC (and it was only one person from one of the villages that made this request). The community member who asked for more money from AEC noted that other NGOs gave money to community members to participate in activities, and said that those who wanted the money often pulled out of AEC activities. It is important to note that this community member was a former candidate from a political party, and may therefore be more used to the idea of giving money to villagers to ensure participation. It is also interesting that this was the only commune that said that without AEC's support, the community would not be able to sustain activities. This was not the view of all the villagers present, only one or two. The five other communes did not ask for money, and confidently stated that they would be able to continue their activities even without AEC, although they noted that they would have more difficulties doing so.

AEC has been successful in helping communities feel more independent. As stated earlier, most of the villages said they could continue advocacy activities and the other projects begun by AEC, even if AEC withdraws its support. All communities chose their own representatives, and stated that decisions affecting the community were made by all community members at a special meeting called to discuss issues and concerns. The communities also said they had internal rules and policies for electing community representatives, and all seemed familiar with the rules. They knew the responsibilities of the community representative, and said that they could change the representative if they were unhappy with his/her work.

Communities are now more willing to advocate for their rights, and feel more capable of doing so. They explained that prior to AEC's trainings and assistance, they were reluctant to speak out about problems affecting their community. They said that first, they did not know they had rights, second, they did not know how to speak with authorities about these issues, and third, they did not know what activities they could legally do. Because of AEC's trainings, they know now all of the above, and are no longer reluctant to speak with authorities when problems arise. They added that there is more solidarity within each community as well as between communities, due to the work of AEC.

NGO partners recognize and value AEC's work with the communities, and draw a direct connection between AEC's work and the strength of the communities in Kampong Chhnang and Pursat.

AEC has recruited village facilitators from the villages; the facilitators assist the communities in organizing and working with the networks. These facilitators were active and highly vocal at the meetings with the evaluator, and seemed to be respected by the community members.

Unlike community representatives who are chosen by the communities themselves, these facilitators are chosen by AEC. One commune noted that before, the facilitator was chosen by the community, but now AEC makes the choice. AEC explained to them that it looks for a person who is qualified and has more time to work for the community. AEC also investigates and checks that the facilitator is not a member of any political party, and the community said it could always tell AEC if they were unhappy with its choice of village facilitator.

One NGO partner raised concerns that AEC needs to be more careful in dealing with community representatives, saying that AEC can sometimes appear biased in favor of or against a particular community representative. The NGO partner gave an example where one community member was accused of selling out to local authorities and receiving benefits in return. According to the NGO partner, AEC did not conduct an investigation into the allegations. The NGO partner said that it had advised AEC to investigate first before it draws conclusions about a community member, and noted that that AEC seemed to have taken the advice provided.

AEC explained that they had, in fact, investigated this case, and found that the person involved had been involved in corruption. They said he had spoken out strongly against the Prime Minister's land measurement in the media, so he was well-known. However, upon speaking with the communities, they found that the person in question was not known to have actually assisted the communities. Still, when this person was arrested and brought to court, AEC communities attended his hearings and provided support.

### **Recommendations:**

AEC should continue using its approach of encouraging self-reliance without using financial incentives.

Aside from checking for possible political influence, AEC should make sure that prior to choosing the facilitator, AEC consults community representatives about the person it chooses. Village facilitators need to be persons trusted by the entire community, and their selection should not cause jealousy or splits within the community, particularly since the facilitators receive some money from AEC. Village facilitators also need to be aware that they are accountable to the community, not just to AEC.

### **Network**

Phnom Kuk, the local network which AEC helped establish is working well. Communities in this network keep in touch with each other on their own initiative, and constantly seek advice from each other. They also meet regularly to discuss problems faced by the communities. The network designs a regular plan of activities, and each community has assigned tasks. They do joint advocacy activities and support each other, for example, when the village activist from Pursat mentioned in the previous section was brought to the provincial court, communities from Kampong Chhnang went to the Pursat Court to show their support for the activist. Villagers from different communes join forest patrols to protect the community forest. They also said that they participate in social activities in villages in other communes. Women's groups and youth groups from the different communes also come together in the network. One commune said that the 9 activists from the Phnom Kuk network were recognized by the Provincial Governor, who takes their phone calls.

The communities said they had met with some other communities from other networks, like CPN, the Cross-Sector Network, the Oral network, and the Prey Long network, but these relationships were not as well-established.

NGO partners recognize AEC's work in establishing the network. Adhoc and Licadho mentioned the strength of the network, and how the communities consult each other and do joint activities. The Cross-Sector Network was extremely pleased with the representatives of Phnom Kuk network who participated in the ASEAN Grassroots People's Assembly in November 2012. Cross-Sector Network said it was particularly impressed by the two women representatives from Phnom Kuk who were in the negotiation panel with authorities. These women dressed and behaved simply, and were thought to be very rural by the other participants. However, when there were issues with the authorities, the two representatives were brave, knew how to deal with the authorities, and always kept their cool. The Cross-Sector Network also said that the Phnom Kuk Network was very active when the Cambodia Grassroots People's Assembly was held in Kampong Chhnang in June 2013. In the opinion of the Cross-Sector Network, the Phnom Kuk Network has communities that are independent, well-trained, not reliant upon money from AEC, who understand what empowerment is, and understand what their role is in terms of social change.

### **Recommendation:**

AEC should continue encouraging the growth and development of the Phnom Kuk network. It should strengthen current informal connections between the Phnom Kuk Network with networks from other provinces across Cambodia, to encourage more cooperation across provinces and regions, and foster a sense of solidarity among communities throughout the country.

### **AEC's Relationship with Authorities**

The relationship between AEC and local authorities is not always good. Communities, staff, Board members, NGO partners and donors noted that because of AEC's work in encouraging the communities to advocate for their rights, local authorities are not always happy with AEC. When AEC does work on livelihood development, the local authorities are more comfortable. Village authorities seem to be more involved (a village chief and deputy were present at one meeting, and they were happy with the work of AEC in training the community), sometimes commune authorities are involved as well. It is district and provincial authorities which are not too happy or don't seem to understand AEC's work.

AEC always invites local authorities to participate in training and activities, but they do not always attend. One commune asked that AEC issue formal letters of invitation prior to activities, to keep local authorities informed about the activity and prevent them from accusing AEC of stirring up trouble in the commune. One NGO partner said AEC did not explain the purpose and legal basis of the computer training for youths to the authorities, so the authorities tried to stop it. The NGO partner spoke with the authorities and advised them to allow the activity, as it fell under the right to education and information permitted by the Cambodian Constitution. The NGO partner noted, however, that local authorities were not happy that the youth would have access to information from outside.

UNDP said that in the project for which it funded AEC, UNDP had intended for target communities and NGOs to encourage their local commune authorities to deal with the Kampong Chhnang Provincial Department of Water Resources and Meteorology in obtaining approval of a plan to build a dam/reservoir. AEC and its communities were unable to

convince the local authorities to make the request to the Provincial Department, and instead, AEC went directly to the Provincial Department and ended up paying money to get the approval. UNDP noted that AEC was not the only NGO that did this; other NGOs in the province and in other areas had similar issues. UNDP said it was disappointed that AEC and its communities' could not work with the local authorities, particularly on an issue of community development which was non-political and would have benefited the authorities as well as the communities. To the evaluator, this was more an indication that AEC had perhaps chosen the wrong project, since its known strengths are in strengthening communities, and not working with local or provincial authorities.

AEC staff said that when they receive threats or complaints from local authorities, they go speak with the authorities as soon as possible, to explain that what they are doing is in line with Cambodian law.

Some communes asked for AEC's help in organizing meetings between the communities and local authorities, to build or strengthen their relationships. AEC should try to do this, also as a way to build its relationship with local authorities, now that it has new funding for this activity.

AEC has not yet established a relationship with national authorities, since it works mainly in Kampong Chhnang and Pursat. It has, however, joined advocacy activities with other NGOs based in Phnom Penh. AEC should continue to link with NGOs and networks in Phnom Penh, to start to develop some relationships with national authorities, which have the power to resolve some of the issues affecting Kampong Chhnang and Pursat.

### **Recommendations:**

AEC should send formal letters of invitation (*not* letters requesting *permission*), which inform local authorities of planned activities, and give the rationale and legal basis behind the activity.

AEC should choose projects that play to its strengths in dealing with communities. It should be careful in seeking donors and projects that are within its expertise and strengths.

AEC should continue to meet with local authorities who do not understand the work of AEC, to explain the work and the reasons behind it.

AEC should try to organize regular meetings between communities and the local authorities, not only to build relationships between them, but to strengthen AEC's relationships as well. AEC has already received funding for this activity.

AEC should continue to link with NGOs and networks in Phnom Penh and participate in a few activities, to try to build relationships with relevant national authorities with the power to resolve issues affecting Kampong Chhnang and Pursat. While a majority of AEC's time should be spent in Kampong Chhnang and Pursat, management and the Board can discuss how much time can be spent in pursuing national linkages.

### **Training**

The training given by AEC is highly appreciated by the communities, who use what they learn in dealing with issues such as domestic violence, in advocating with local authorities,

and for the youth, in gathering and sending out information about the community online. One commune received training on setting up small businesses based on NTFP; this training was very useful for them.

Training, however, can be improved. All the villages noted that they have not retained a lot of what they learned, and they requested refresher courses. Many of the communities met indicated that they wanted additional training. When the evaluator asked what topics they wanted training on, most named topics previously covered by AEC (human rights, land law, forestry law, domestic violence, advocacy). They explained that not all of them clearly understood these topics, or that they had forgotten them.

Some villagers also noted that when they are given new trainings, they sometimes forget what they learned in the previous training. The timing of the trainings given also has to be considered; there should be adequate time between training for people to absorb and understand what they learned.

The communities all said that training was usually by lecture, with handouts and question and answer portions, and sometimes slides and videos and written exercises. AEC should include some interactive training, using case studies, role playing, group discussions and games (AEC staff said in some domestic violence trainings, they used role playing techniques). A mix of interactive and traditional training assists participants in absorbing more of what is taught, and gives them a more active role in learning.. This type of training is more in line with AEC's objectives of empowering communities. It also will reach a wider audience, in that those who are illiterate may still be able to join some of the training sessions. AEC staff should learn these techniques from experienced trainers; this is an added skill that will serve AEC staff well in its work. AEC should also consider training community representatives and village facilitators in these techniques, so they can use them in sharing information with their communities.

One commune noted that AEC tended to choose the same persons for training, and asked that it sometimes choose other participants to join training. Others requested that training be held in the villages, so that more could participate. AEC staff said it extends invitations to other persons, but only the persons who are the most interested and have time attend the trainings. Community representatives and village facilitators sometimes have difficulty passing on information they learned, particularly if it is somewhat technical, so not everyone understands when they share information with community members.

Communities requested additional training on how to raise livestock, including how to treat sick animals, and on tree-planting and agriculture, which AEC had not previously provided.

### **Recommendations:**

AEC should include at least one follow-up refresher course per training, to ensure that community members retain what they learned in previous trainings. These refresher courses can be scheduled into the strategic plans and personal work plans of AEC staff.

The timing of trainings has to be carefully planned, so as not to overwhelm communities with too much information, and give them time to absorb lessons from the training.

AEC should also consider a more participatory approach to training, which also helps with retention of information. It can use a mix of interactive training with traditional classroom method training.

AEC should consider sending its staff, village facilitators and community representatives to learn participatory interactive training methods.

Also, as much as possible, training should be done onsite, and community members, not just community representatives, should be encouraged to attend.

AEC should assist communities in finding an NGO or authority willing to provide training on raising livestock and on agricultural techniques.

### ***Women Empowerment***

The women's groups are one of the most effective aspects of AEC's work. Women are extremely active in community activities and in networking activities. Women present in the meetings with the evaluator said that they not only felt that they were speaking up more, they also felt they were being heard more. Before they didn't have access to information from the outside, and didn't know their rights. Now they do, and they know how to protect their rights. There is more solidarity between women in the community, and women in the network. Women were also taking on leadership roles in the community, and represented the Phnom Kuk network in outside activities. One commune reported that activities conducted by women receive more (positive) attention from the authorities, who respond to their complaints.

The issue of domestic violence was important to the women, with most communities saying that because of AEC's assistance in training and advocacy, the incidence of domestic violence had significantly decreased in their villages. In one commune, women reported that local authorities were even asking for their assistance in dealing with cases of domestic violence.

As mentioned earlier, the Cross-Sector network was very impressed with two women representatives from Phnom Kuk, who were part of the negotiation panel for the ASEAN Grass Roots People's Assembly last November.

When asked about their needs, the women's groups identified adequate income for their families, food security, health, sanitation and education for the children. They said that AEC had helped with some of these needs, but not all. They noted that sometimes AEC helped find other NGOs who could assist with the other needs.

NGOs which do these services often communicate directly with authorities, without talking with communities. Local authorities don't often share information with the communities about the projects that NGOs want to set up. Perhaps AEC can help with linking NGOs directly with communities, if they want to meet them, rather than meet only with authorities.

### ***Recommendations***

AEC should continue its women empowerment project, which is highly effective and is producing strong women leaders.

AEC should help communities find other NGOs to assist in dealing with the women's other needs, such as better health care, education, sanitation and food security. AEC should link NGOs directly with the communities, should these NGOs be willing to do

so. These NGOs need to have similar approaches to AEC, so as not to create relationships of dependency with the communities.

### ***Youth Empowerment***

While not as strong as the women's groups, the youth groups that the evaluator met said that they now felt they had roles in the community. They joined forest patrols, and sometimes assisted the community by making lists, reports and taking notes at community meetings. In one commune where some youths had been disrupting ceremonies, the youth group called a meeting with the misbehaving youths, and convinced them to change their ways.

AEC selected a few young people from a few villages for computer training, and the villages requested that more youths (as well as some adults) be given the training. The youth groups were taught to how to be administrators of the computer, how to use Microsoft Word, how to write and send emails, and how to use Facebook. They use these skills only to share and receive information about and for the community, they do not use these skills to help them improve their lives or to find jobs. The youth groups now felt they could send information about the community's problems, and receive information not only on possible solutions, but on issues occurring in other parts of the country and even internationally. They said, however, that they were hampered by lack of English, by lack of computers and generators, because electricity was not always available in their areas.

When asked about their needs, the youth groups said they would like access to jobs, and would like skills training (English, sewing and other vocational skills). The youth groups which were in villages not included in the computer training project requested computer training. Some communes noted a lack of teachers in the public schools, which put them at a disadvantage. They said that they had not previously raised these needs with AEC.

### **Recommendations**

AEC should continue with the computer training, expand it to other villages, and perhaps even include a few adults in the training.

While it is good that the youth understand that computer use is primarily for the good of the community and its advocacy activities, they should also be allowed to use their newly-learned skills for their own personal development, such as in finding work. More than likely, the young people who go to find jobs outside of the community will continue to support family members who remain in the community. Added skills will give them an easier time in finding a job, and they will be able to infuse more income into their communities.

AEC should assist communities in finding other partners who can provide the needed skills training for the youth. As much as possible, NGO partners should have a similar way of working with the community as AEC.

AEC should link youths in these communities to other youth groups outside of the Phnom Kuk network facing similar issues, so they can share experiences and be more aware of the issues faced by the youth nationwide.

### ***Climate Change and Environment***

This aspect of AEC's work is tied to the communities' need to protect the forest, and is connected to the other programs of women's empowerment, youth empowerment, community development and livelihood development. Villagers noted that their problems began when outsiders began to encroach upon not only their land, but the forests that they had traditionally depended on for their livelihood. AEC has helped establish community forests, and supports communities which patrol the forests and protect against encroachment and illegal logging. Much of the advocacy work done by communities, and supported by AEC is also for the purpose of protecting forests and lands.

### ***Livelihood Development***

Savings groups, savings boxes (village support funds), rice banks and the like which AEC helped establish, were all considered highly useful by the communities and the local authorities. Each community has two types of savings boxes; one for advocacy, the other for earning money for the community. Interest from the second box is sometimes transferred to the advocacy savings box. Most communities said that the money they had in the savings boxes were used for advocacy activities and forest patrols (some villagers said they even brought out their own money, as well). Some communities used the money for emergency cases, e.g. money for funerals, help to families affected by fires, or for births. Some communities lend money to villagers. Each community established a committee to manage the funds; the committee is responsible for maintaining records of how the funds are used. Decisions on how funds are used are made by the community, not just the committee.

UNDP mentioned that it visited a community which had formerly been supported by AEC for community forestry. When funding for AEC's project ended, another NGO took over in assisting the community forestry project. UNDP noted, however, that the savings box and group established by AEC were still functioning, even after AEC left. This indicates how effective this particular aspect of AEC's work is, and how communities have taken ownership of this part of the project, and were able to maintain it even after AEC withdrew its support.

AEC contributed \$500.00 US to each community, which they combined, so each commune has \$1,500.00 starting fund. The communities reported that at the moment, the savings boxes do not contain enough money for the community to use to support development of the community. Communities noted that they would like to be able to use their savings to assist in community development (such as buying livestock, seedlings, and the like). At this point, however, the funds are too small to use for these purposes.

While AEC has supported a few livelihood projects in the past (providing some livestock, and supporting some NTFP crafts), it does not do this consistently, and has, in fact, phased out this part of its work in some communities. Communities have requested support in this area, asking for training on livestock-raising and agriculture. NGO partners note that improving livelihood in the communities is likely to lead to more participation in activities and advocacy. A Board Member suggested that AEC could help community groups think about their livelihood situation and possible options, and then assist them in coming up with initiatives.

### **Recommendations:**

AEC should maintain the establishment of village savings funds, savings boxes, rice banks and the like. It should encourage the use of these funds not only for advocacy activities, but, when funds are sufficient, for development of the community.

AEC should meet with communities to discuss their livelihood situation, and the options they have to improve their livelihood. With AEC's help, the community can then come up with livelihood initiatives.

Once communities have decided what livelihood initiatives they would like, AEC can help link different NGOs with the communities, to assist in livelihood development. AEC should look for NGO partners with the correct mindset, who will further empower the community, and not make it dependent on assistance.

### ***Working with NGO Partners***

There is a sub-committee on human rights and forestry in the Kampong Chhnang NGO network. AEC is part of this sub-committee together with Adhoc, Licadho, KKKHRA and CCD. AEC shares information with this sub-committee, and receives information in return.

For the most part, NGO partners were satisfied with AEC's projects, and lauded its work with the community. Only one NGO had negative remarks, saying that AEC was not active in the Kampong Chhnang network, and might be jealous of other NGOs who had a higher profile. It was explained by AEC staff and a board member, that this NGO had issues of its own, and might have made negative comments out of jealousy.

There have been some issues of overlap and conflicting activities scheduled by other NGOs which also work in AEC target areas. AEC needs to meet and coordinate more with these other NGOs to avoid conflicting activities, and overloading communities with meetings and workshops. AEC also needs to develop better relationships with these NGOs, so that it can raise, in a non-confrontational manner, problems reported by community members about projects established or supported by these NGOs.

NGO partner said they were willing to do more activities with AEC and the communities. They noted that they had expertise in particular areas, and wanted to conduct joint activities with AEC to share this expertise. Other partners wanted more exchange visits between communities they assist in other provinces, and the communities AEC assists in Kampong Chhnang and Pursat.

Some NGOs and some donors felt that AEC was "shy" and avoided taking credit for some of its work. The Cross-Sector Network praised AEC for their staff's valuable contributions to the Grassroots People's Assemblies, and for allowing the use of its office when the CGPA was held in Kampong Chhnang. The Cross-Sector Network said that AEC had agreed to the Cross-Sector Network's taking credit for much of the work that AEC had done; this was so that AEC would not face problems from local authorities. The Cross-Sector Network noted, however, that it might not be in AEC's best interests to "hide" its achievements.

The evaluator happened to meet with a small donor agency in Phnom Penh, and mentioned the evaluation of AEC. This donor group had not heard of AEC before, and wanted to know more, because it seemed that AEC's work is in line with the donor's funding objectives and mandate.

Phnom Penh-based NGOs felt that AEC should join more advocacy activities in the national level, so that it could establish contacts at this level (particularly relevant national authorities), and link these contacts with communities back in Kampong Chhnang/Pursat.

AEC needs to find ways to influence other NGOs, so that they move away from the financial incentive model. AEC staff said that they had raised this issue at NGO meetings, but that other NGOs did not react favorably.

### **Recommendations:**

AEC should continue to participate in local NGO networks, and national NGO networks and establish more contacts, so that it raises its profile.

AEC should consider joint projects with NGO partners, so that communities can benefit from the partners' expertise. AEC has to ensure, however, that the NGO partners have the same approach as AEC.

AEC should coordinate with other NGOs working in the same target area, so that scheduling conflicts can be avoided. AEC should be able to inform NGO partners about problems raised by communities affecting the partners' projects.

While AEC's main focus should remain Kampong Chhnang and Pursat, it would benefit from joining a few national advocacy activities. It should choose these activities carefully, so as to maximize benefit for the communities, and for AEC.

AEC needs to find a good balance between keeping a low profile (to prevent undue problems with local authorities) and making itself known for its good work. Perhaps the AEC Board can help AEC management and staff increase its profile, at least to share its approach to dealing with communities, so that other NGOs might be influenced and learn from their experiences.

### ***Management***

AEC is still in transition to becoming a fully professional NGO; it has more funding now, and donors have more requirements. AEC has to deal with more administrative issues caused by these additional requirements. However, AEC should retain its character of focusing mainly on the communities it assists, and ensuring that it continues to use the correct approach in dealing with these communities. AEC does not behave like a traditional NGO, in the sense that it works quite closely with communities, and does not patronize them or dictate to them. This approach has contributed to AEC's success in working with communities.

Donors raised an issue about AEC's having built its office on land belonging to the Director's son, using money contributed by AEC staff. To AEC's credit, it consulted its Board and informed its donors prior to doing so. The reason for doing this was a lack of funds, that prevented AEC from finding a good location for its office. AEC has also not paid rent to the Director's son for the past three years. However, due to the appearance of impropriety, it was recommended by donors that AEC move its office. AEC is planning on doing this in October 2013.

AEC has a good 2010-2015 Strategic Plan, particularly in terms of activities to be accomplished and goals to be achieved for improvement of staff and management and organizational capacity. However, a major flaw of the plan is that no timeline is included. While this allows flexibility on AEC's part, it also can lead to delays in achieving goals. AEC should give itself reasonable deadlines to achieve goals.

AEC Staff are highly committed, and are unafraid to work despite difficulties, risks and threats. Staff are well-liked by the communities; villagers all said that AEC staff were respectful, supportive and willing to explain when villagers had questions. If AEC staff did not know the answer to their questions, they would say so, and try to find out the answers. Most staff (Program Coordinator, Field Coordinator and IT Coordinator, with the Executive Director going less often because of health issues) spend a majority of their time in the field. NGO partners have a good impression of the staff, but mainly know the Program Manager and the Director

The staff still need some strengthening. The more recently hired staff were not so aware of the connections between AEC's vision/mission and their daily work; they were also not so aware of the root causes of issues faced by the communities, and whether AECs work addresses these root causes. One NGO partner suggested that AEC staff be trained in critical political analysis, so that when they provide information to the communities, they can assist communities in developing critical analysis of power structures, and the root causes of their problems.

Staff need additional skills training to do their work. Donors noted that the Finance Officer needed training in finance and accounting and AEC management is taking steps to address this issue by hiring a Financial Officer who has undergone the necessary training. Donors said reports submitted to them were adequate, although one donor noted that it accepted reports written in Khmer, rather than English, because the staff had difficulty writing in English. Also, as previously noted, staff who engage in training communities, should learn new training skills, particularly in interactive training.

AEC is heavily dependent on the Project Manager, especially since the Director, due to health issues, has not been able to be as active as she was previously. It is not practical to rely so much on a single staff member; it puts additional stress and burden on that person and could lead to their leaving AEC. Perhaps an additional staff member, who fits in well with AEC and has the correct mindset for working with AEC, can be hired to assist with administrative responsibilities (which are also not the Director's strength, which is why the Project Manager bears a lot of the burden). Or, if the previous Finance Officer has skills in administrative matters, perhaps he can assist the Project Manager. The responsibilities of the Project Manager can also be more evenly distributed, and the Director should work with other staff, to help develop their capacities as well. The Director's strengths are her ability to work with communities, and deal with local authorities. She could mentor newer staff in these skills, so that they become more valuable staff members of AEC.

NGO partners and AEC management admit that there is a problem of gender-balance in AEC. Of the five staff members, only the Director is female. The Project Manager said that AEC had made attempts to hire women staff members, but not many were willing to live in Kampong Chhnang, and spend so much time in the field.

### **Recommendations:**

AEC should retain its character of focusing mainly on the communities it assists, and ensuring that it continues to use the correct approach in dealing with these communities.

AEC should continue to be open with its Board and its donors, so that avoids unethical behaviour, and the appearance of impropriety.

AEC needs to revise its Strategic Plan, so that it contains clear timelines and deadlines for achieving objectives. AEC Staff and Board should discuss this plan to come up with time periods that are workable and acceptable to AEC staff.

AEC staff still need strengthening in terms of:

- skills needed to perform their jobs
  - The Director can share her expertise with staff members, and act as a mentor to them.
  - Training skills, particularly interactive training techniques and English (not just speaking but how to write in English)
- political analysis. Staff need to be able to identify the root causes of the problems faced by communities, so that its work can address these root causes. Staff can also help communities use critical analysis in understanding their problems.

There should not be so much reliance on a single staff member (the Project Manager), who is responsible for much of AEC's administrative work, as well as its substantive work. The Project Manager needs assistance to handle the administrative issues, so that he can focus on substantive issues.

AEC needs to keep trying to actively recruit women staff members, to improve (slightly) the gender balance in the organization. Staff recruited need to have the correct approach to working with communities, and working in AEC.

### Role of the Board of Directors

Board members have stated that they only meet twice a year, due in part to the fact that one Board Member is based in the US and only came to Cambodia twice a year. Peter Swift has since resigned, and AEC has recruited someone to replace him (the new person is based in Phnom Penh). At the moment, AEC staff note that not all Board members are active, especially since all of the Board Members are not based in Kampong Chhnang and Pursat, and two of the Board members are not in Phnom Penh. Staff identified only two Board Members as being active. Board members and the Director have said that communication is mostly done through email or telephone.

According to AEC's By-Laws, the Board of Directors has the following responsibilities:

- Monitoring the work of the director of the organization;
- Instruct and provide guidance to the director of the organization, in accordance with the objectives and core areas of work of AEC; and
- Assist with fundraising to enable AEC to implement its projects.

These responsibilities indicate that the Board of Directors is meant to be a governing Board, which directly oversees the work of the Director. However, the Board has not really been active, since it rarely meets to make decisions. The Board members admit that they have not really assisted much in fundraising for AEC. The Board is meant to assist the Director, whose strengths, as mentioned previously, are not in management and administration. The skills and expertise of all Board members should be fully utilized, given their qualifications.

The 2010-2015 Strategic Plan contain a lot of goals and objectives regarding the Board of Directors. AEC needs to implement this Strategic Plan.

### Recommendations:

AEC should also think about the composition of the Board, so that it has members who are able to actively participate in meetings and contribute expertise and knowledge to AEC.

Board members should be more active, and fulfill their responsibilities mandated in the AEC By-laws. If Board members feel they are unable to fulfill these responsibilities, they should inform AEC, so that AEC can decide whether to recruit new Board members.

AEC should implement its 2010-2015 Strategic Plan, especially the activities and goals related to the Board of Directors.

### ***Exit Strategy***

It is important for AEC to think about its exit strategy even from the time it begins working with communities. The 2010-2015 strategic plan is one way to think about an exit strategy, as it is a guide that can be applied to all villages that AEC works with, since it contains all the activities and goals that AEC wishes to achieve. However, as stated earlier, the current 2010-2015 strategic plan has no dates or timeline. This prevents the creation of an exit strategy. AEC should consider creating plans for each community it works with, including a starting date and a proposed ending date, and with yearly goals and objectives. AEC can then measure a community's progress against the goals it has set each year; perhaps it will find that certain communities need more time to achieve particular goals, while other communities can move on to goals planned for succeeding years. A consultant can be hired for a short period to help AEC staff draw up these plans for each village. Having this plan will also help AEC decide which villages can stand on their own, so that they can initiate new projects in other areas.

Communities where AEC had begun phasing out certain projects noted that AEC visits them less, and said that they wished AEC would come more often. While they knew that they could still consult AEC about their problems, they wanted AEC to continue to visit the communities. AEC needs to be clearer with the communities about time frames, and should let them know, from the beginning, that AEC projects will have a definite end date. This way, communities will not be surprised when AEC begins to phase out activities, and will be prepared for this time.

### **Recommendations:**

AEC needs to revise its Strategic Plan to include dates and a timeline. AEC should also consider creating plans which track the communities that AEC works with. These plans should have a start date and proposed end date, and include yearly goals and activities. A short-term consultant can be hired to assist in drawing up these plans which can be put on a computer.

AEC should let communities know, from the beginning, that AEC projects will have a definite end date, to help prepare communities to become independent and be less reliant on AEC.

It is good that communities know that in times of need, they can still consult AEC by telephone, so that they don't feel completely abandoned.

## **Annex A: List of Documents Reviewed**

1. By-Laws of AEC
2. Registration with the Ministry of Interior
3. 2009 Evaluation Report
4. AEC Case Studies
5. AEC Success Stories
6. Annual Report 2010-2011
7. AEC Strategic Plan 2010-2015
8. AEC Report to McKnight and Novib
9. AEC Global Proposal

## **Annex B: List of Persons/Communities Met**

### Communities

#### **Kampong Chhnang**

Boribor District

Anchang ROUNG Commune

Anchang ROUNG

Andong Rovieng

Prey Preal

Pich Changva Commune

Taing Trapaing

Taing Thneum

Thnal

Teuk Chrab

Trapaing Chan Commune

Sanlang

Kandal

Kbal Damrei

Teuk Phos District

Kraing Skear Commune

Chan Trak

Trapaing Mlou

#### **Pursat**

Krakor District

Kbal Trach Commune

Kralanh

Srey Russey

Anlong Thnot Commune

Kaing Moeurng

### NGO Partners

Adhoc Kampong Chhnang

Licadho Kampong Chhnang

Licadho Pursat

BCV

CCD

CYN

CCFC

Cross-Sector Network

## Board Members

Ms. Tan Sokhom

Ms. Collette O'Regan

Email correspondence with: Mr. Peter Swift  
Mr. Mom Riam

## Donors

Asia Foundation

McKnight Foundation

SADP (now merged with The McKnight Foundation)

UNDP