

Mapping Cambodian research expertise and activities
**A discussion paper on the need for a mapping exercise to strengthen social science
research infrastructure**

Roger Henke
Centre for Advanced Study (CAS)
PO Box 2030, # 85, Road 141, Sangkat Veal Vong Khan 7 Makara, Phnom Penh,
Cambodia
Tel. +855-23-214494
rhenke@forum.org.kh

Abstract

This paper argues for the need of mapping Cambodian research expertise, projects and output. Good research as well as responsible use of research is embedded within the universe of what we (already) know of a particular subject. This presupposes easy access to information about expertise and completed and ongoing projects. At present overviews of either are non-existent. Although access to ongoing work is a problem everywhere, it is argued that Cambodia is particularly disadvantaged in that much of its research output is only available as grey literature and most of its research is non-academic contract work.

Next, an outline of what a systematic mapping exercise would imply is presented as well as options for what kind of information to include in such a project. It is argued that adequate coverage of ongoing and completed research cannot be achieved on the basis of support of the research community alone. Active involvement of NGO-networks, the UN system, and the big bi-lateral and multi-lateral donors is also required. It is also argued that the value of any mapping project will be much greater if its outcome is from the start conceptualized as constituting a research infrastructure resource that needs institutional embedding and regular maintenance.

To conclude, the paper promotes the idea of thinking about such a resource not only in terms of the information it offers to those conducting research on a particular topic and those looking for policy relevant research information on a particular topic, but also as a rallying point for social science research advocacy and in terms of a database for answering questions about trends in research topics or trends in the ratio local/foreign managed research. However, if the resource is to be useful for answering such questions, this will have to part of its objectives from the start.

Contents

- Introduction
- 1. The need of mapping Cambodian research expertise, projects and output
- 2. What is implied by a mapping exercise
 - 2.1 Options for the kind of information to include
 - 2.2 An outline for a systematic mapping exercise
 - 2.3 A research infrastructure resource
- Conclusion

Introduction

This paper is not a research paper. However, it is grounded in an environmental analysis conducted as part of an institutional assessment of a research institute, the Centre for Advanced Study (CAS) to which I am currently attached as an OD/ID advisor. Thus, although it is limited, the analysis does have an empirical basis.

The purpose of this discussion paper is to report on the ongoing development of ideas about possibilities to address the need for a mapping exercise to strengthen social science research infrastructure, a need that was identified in the environmental analysis. These ideas have generated institutional interest at RUPP, CDRI, the research forum and CCC. The author hopes and expects that sharing these ideas with the wider audience of the fifth socio-cultural research congress on Cambodia will generate sufficient input to allow for a translation of these ideas into one or more practical proposals.

Ultimately, the paper is about more general ways to strengthen the Cambodian social science research infrastructure. That issue affects all of us who are doing and/or using research. The more input into the conceptual design the proposal development receives, the better its outcome will serve your interests. The reader is explicitly invited to forward her or his comments to the author!

1. The need of mapping Cambodian research expertise, projects and output

Good research as well as responsible use of research should be embedded within the universe of what we (already) know of a particular subject. This presupposes easy access to information about expertise and completed and ongoing projects¹. At present overviews of either are non-existent. Although access to ongoing work is a problem everywhere, Cambodia is particularly disadvantaged.

Access is fully dependent upon the quality of one's (personal) network, the "coverage" of which is necessarily limited. Again, to a certain extent this is the case all over the world. But for Cambodia this access problem is aggravated by a complex of hampering factors:

- ❑ Its universities are not the intellectual hubs that they are in other countries, a major reason being that they are not (yet) research universities.
- ❑ Cambodia lacks a social science library. Information is dispersed over a great number of small institutional libraries.
- ❑ Related to the above: research is largely carried out by non-university actors (although regularly by university staff....) only very few of which are immediately identifiable as research institutions.
- ❑ Related to the above: much research on and in Cambodia by foreign academics is therefore also less easily traceable than is the case elsewhere because often its local

¹ This paper does not address the issue of under-utilization of available and accessible research information, by both the research community itself – with its bias towards primary research rather than grounding new data-gathering in a systematic review of existing knowledge – and by the policy and practice audience of research – who more often than not choose to neglect research information when it does not support pre-established conclusions. I recognize that accessibility in itself does not guarantee proper use, and would subscribe to any argument for better use of research. However, without general accessibility most utilization focused efforts do not make much sense.

institutional base (if there is even any...) is not the university or another research institution.

- ❑ The current lack of an international academic network of Cambodia specialists is no help either.
- ❑ Most research in Cambodia is done by and/or for the aid community (which is a very diverse lot).
- ❑ This also means that most research is contract research. And for many organizations that commission research dissemination beyond the circle of intended (internal) users is not high on the agenda.
- ❑ This also means that much research is done by or under the supervision of consultants, local or foreign, and also from that side active dissemination interest cannot be expected.

The above situation analysis results from an environmental analysis conducted this autumn as part of an institutional assessment of the Centre for Advanced study, one of the few non-governmental Cambodian research institutes. Obviously, given the limitations of this assessment, I cannot substantiate that Cambodia stands out in terms of being a difficult environment to access research information by systematic comparative data but the conclusion has been confirmed by a good number of researchers with regional experience that I have talked with over the course of a three months period.

2. What is implied by a mapping exercise

2.1 Options for the kind of information to include

When one intends to map expertise and completed and ongoing projects, several questions have to be answered before the 'map' can be drawn:

- ❑ *How broad can or should the definition of the relevant universe of expertise and projects be?* All of social sciences and humanities? Deciding upon the issue of coverage can be guided by considerations regarding the intended users of the map and by practical concerns regarding available or potential resources for the mapping.

If one envisions the resulting map to be a resource for the social science research community, facilitating access to information beyond the narrow confines of one's own disciplinary/issue-arena network, a broad definition is called for. However, the broader the definition of one's universe, the bigger the mapping exercise. Also, the broader the universe, the more difficult to define particular interests willing to fund such a exercise.

If one accepts the statement that – in general - a map is more valuable the fewer its uncharted areas, and also accepts that to create a reasonably comprehensive overview implies a very active and therefore time-intensive information gathering approach, feasibility becomes a real issue: a worthwhile map presupposes proper resources.

In combination, the above two lines of thought suggest that one would have to think of what potential donors would be willing to consider, one might have to be selective, or look for different donors for different parts of the whole. If so, what is then the most sensible partitioning?

- *How far back in time should the mapping go?* The further back in time one goes, the more valuable the overview of research completed will become. At the same time, the more limited the request to information suppliers, the greater the response will be. And the more limited the request, the more feasible – in terms of resources required – the project will be. What is the optimum here?
- *Is a map of expertise and research activities the only and/or the most important need?* The idea that the Cambodia-oriented research community would profit from overviews of available expertise and research activities is not my own. The research forum, an initiative co-chaired by CDRI and the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities of RUPP, has to be credited with putting this need on the agenda more than one and a half years ago. Talking my way through town the need for accessible and up to date information with respect to these two was certainly substantiated.

However, they were not the only needs mentioned. Two more stand out:

1. Access to literature is limited and very dispersed. This again can be broken down into two issues:
 - ✓ Many important journals are not available. Just to give an example: Elsevier's "World Development" that recently published an excellent paper by our colleagues from CDRI on technical assistance and capacity development in an Aid-Dependent Economy (many of you will be familiar with the report that is the basis for this article) is nowhere to be found in Cambodia. Availability of journals is an issue in all LDCs and I will not dwell on it here.
 - ✓ However, the dispersion of information across many different small and often specialized libraries is something that could be taken on board in a mapping exercise. Colleagues tell me that collecting background information for a research project implies visiting the libraries of RUPP, various UN organizations, CDRI, and of NGO's working in the field concerned. An overview of institutional libraries, of their specific areas of interest and of the particular computer program used to catalogue their holdings might be a helpful resource in itself and a good starting point for exploring the possibilities for a web-based inter-library search facility.

2. Another need mentioned regularly is issue-arena based discussion lists that one can use to post information and ask questions. This is not to say there are no list-serves around, e.g. the above mentioned research forum runs a yahoo group facility and it appears there are quite a few topical mailing-lists, usually run by a bigger donor working on the issue. But their existence is only known to those who already happen to belong to the network. And most are only used to post information considered relevant by the list-serve monitor. A centrally accessible overview and subscription facility would greatly increase information access.

But the needs mentioned in the conversations I had during the environmental scan of CAS do not exhaust the possibilities for improving research resources through making information systematically available. There is at least one that should be mentioned here:

- ✓ An overview of larger/nationally representative data sets. It is true that access to research project and/or output information in principle provides the possibility for such an overview. However, experience from countries with advanced social science research systems suggests that separate attention to data is important, even if only because the information requirements for a data-inventory are much more elaborate than the requirements of project information in general. If all projects would be requested to provide information at the level of detail that one would want from large representative survey projects the response rate would most likely become dismal.

The WFP is currently creating a data library containing the well-known HSES, Census and other poverty-relevant data sets. But there are many more data sets out there. Cambodia can be called a ‘data-rich’ country², which is a very positive thing, but only if these data are traceable and accessible....

2.2 An outline for a systematic mapping exercise

It is evident, given the institutional setting of most research, that adequate coverage of ongoing and completed research cannot be achieved on the basis of support of the research community alone. Active involvement of NGO-networks, the UN system, and the big bi-lateral and multi-lateral donors is required. Obvious strategies for information gathering include:

- Directly contacting research organizations (including universities), International Development Organizations (INGOs and others), and Cambodian NGOs. For many of these, a project would greatly profit from being done in explicit partnership with CCC³.

² A remark made by Tomoki Fujii (WFP poverty mapping project) during the 23-8-2002 research forum meeting.

³ CCC has already indicated its willingness for partnership.

- Contacting some of the bigger donor-agencies and requesting (partial) access to their databases of research consultants.
- Snow-balling: asking a limited set of well-connected researchers to draw up lists of their research networks.
- A literature search on a couple of broad categories, making use of local libraries (that contain a lot of grey and therefore otherwise inaccessible material), and of some international facilities, and tracking references of subsets of core publications.
- Contacting international academic clearing houses (IIAS, AAS,...)

This also relates to the question of what kind of access would be most valuable. In other words, what kind of output should be envisioned for a mapping exercise. I would imagine that most would prefer a database that can be accessed through internet and that includes as much research output as possible in the form of on-line available documents. This might be way beyond a feasible project objective. Still, being explicit about what one would ideally expect creates an important benchmark for the way a project is set up.

Also, a web-based resource for research expertise and research projects would fit well with all of the other resources suggested above:

- a web-based overview of discussion-lists.
- a web-based overview of libraries, their areas of specialization, etc.
- a web-based overview of larger/nationally representative data sets

If one tries to conceptualize the above in terms of a project it should be stressed that the *real* issues to be solved in order for such mapping to be feasible, i.e. to reach an acceptable level of coverage⁴ with reasonable investments of staff-capacity⁵, are *not* the technical ones. The real problems are those of collaboration and the willingness to share information. Several aspects can be distinguished:

- At the level of information-gathering, projects like these are always confronted with the non-response problem: although all that are approached for collaboration/information sharing would in fact profit from its output, many organizations and individuals will not respond, be it because of lack of time or staff-capacity, because of their judgment that costs outweigh possible profits, because of unwillingness to share information (for fear of losing competitive advantage), etc. So the question is what conceptual and/or practical incentives can be created to minimize non-response?
- One very obvious strategy to address this issue is embedding the information gathering within a partnership network of stakeholders, that all commit themselves to the mapping. In as far as the combined individual networks of the partners cover most organizations that are requested to submit information this may take care of mistrust.

⁴ However, I would argue that the standard for what is 'acceptable' must be quite strict, i.c. 'near comprehensive' for the resulting resource to become widely used. In the absence of a (legal) obligation to submit one's information this implies a very active acquisition strategy.

⁵ 'Reasonable' in this context refers to what is fundable.

- But in order to really commit stakeholders to such a partnership, the resulting resource needs to be something that actually facilitates their day-to-day operations not just once but continuously. One major condition to be fulfilled for that to happen is that the output remains valuable for a long time after becoming available.

2.3 A research infrastructure resource

In other words, all of the above does not make much sense as a one-off product. We are all familiar with the ‘let’s create a database’ reflex when any information accessibility need arises. The usual response to the reflex is to bring in a consultant who creates a database, which is then filled, starts losing its up-to-date character within 6 to 12 months and is a dead duck within 18, until after 36, the need is rediscovered, often by another stakeholder, a consultant is called in, sometimes the same one, etc.... And because we are all familiar with this process, enthusiasm for database-projects is generally limited.

Therefore, building in facilities for updating/maintenance are crucial. Thus, any mapping project has to be conceptualized as constituting a research infrastructure resource that needs institutional embedding and regular maintenance from the start.

The major reason for many database project proposals to remain silent on the updating/maintenance issue, or to rhetorically address it with some unrealistic expectations about the updating being taken care of from year two onwards by the direct stakeholders, is that being frank about it implies presenting a multi-year budget and multi-year budgets add up to a lot of money, even if the yearly amounts are very reasonable. The underlying attitude, or maybe one should label it ‘hope’, is that once the first step has been funded, the rest will follow. Unfortunately, the existence of a stereotypical database project scenario (see above) already shows that this is unrealistic.

I therefore strongly advocate an approach that explicitly recognizes the required multi-year perspective and the need to embed any initiative like this within a vision for an appropriate institutional setting.

It is certainly true that it is difficult to identify a ‘natural’ institutional setting in Cambodia for such an infrastructure. Most research being non-academic, RUPP is not a likely candidate, although it would be an important partner and stakeholder in any initiative. But neither is any of the other stakeholders. Therefore it makes sense to switch one’s ‘thinking hats’ and rather than looking for an existing institutional setting into which to embed this resource look for an institutional setting that can be created around such a resource.

One suggestion received that seems to strike a cord with many is using the resource(s) created – including the partnership of stakeholders involved – as a rallying point for a future Cambodian Association of Social Science.

Conclusion

Up to now, I have followed the rhetorical strategy of taking the usefulness of (web-based) database access to research expertise, research projects, research output, data-sets and issue-arena stakeholders for granted. You haven't been given more arguments than that "good research as well as responsible use of research should be embedded within the universe of what we (already) know of a particular subject". In a way, that is sufficient, because this is what science is all about. Nevertheless, by way of conclusion I am going to indicate some of the possibilities for using such resources.

For reasons beyond my comprehension social science research *infrastructure* is notoriously difficult to get funded. It is either taken for granted, often unfoundedly, regarded as something that can be financed out of overheads on one's core business (research projects), usually an unrealistic assumption, or, in a variation on the tragedy of the commons, considered no one's responsibility in particular. In my experience most researchers, and the Cambodian 'scene' has not been an exception to that, are captivated by their individual projects and *au fond* are not interested in investing their time in 'meta-issues' like resources facilitating their core business⁶. However that may be, research communities have to realize that they are themselves responsible for looking after their 'business sector' and that includes its institutional and material infrastructure. It directly affects the quality of their work, the possibilities open to them and the legitimacy of their claim to producing a specific and important kind of knowledge for the public domain. The resources envisioned in this paper could contribute to the above by⁷:

- ❑ Facilitating the production of *systematic reviews of existing knowledge* on particular subjects. Comprehensive overviews of research on particular subjects are a *sine qua non* for systematic reviews of existing knowledge on those subjects. In general, the research community has an unfortunate bias towards gathering primary data, without first assessing in a transparent, systematic and methodologically sound way existing knowledge. Research funders also suffer from this bias. One could argue that the non-cumulative nature of most social science knowledge is at least partly caused by this disinterest in existing material. Research users from the worlds of policy and practice on the other hand are very interested in 'what we know already about subject X'. Unfortunately, when the roles of user and funder overlap, as is often the case in Cambodia, this interest is translated into something like a two to four week 'literature review' intro to the research project proper. Anyone familiar with the few specialized fields wherein systematic reviewing is taken seriously⁸ will know that this is grossly inadequate.

⁶ Resources are not the only 'meta-issue' that receive insufficient attention from the research community. Fixation on what most consider their core business, i.e. empirical research work, means that fundamentals like the philosophical assumptions underlying research approaches and all kinds of more practical methodological issues have been sidelined into relatively small disciplinary corners of their own that do not communicate with/influence mainstream core business very much.

⁷ This means that the obvious advantages of having easier access to colleagues working on topics of one's interest and to their work are not detailed again here, although these are at least as important as anything listed!

⁸ I am referring to the Cochrane library in the medical field, the Campbell collaboration in the field of social experiments, and the recently established UK network of Evidence Based Policy.

- ❑ *Re-analysis and meta-analysis of existing data sets* and combining different data sets covering the same population. Again, an issue that is not specific to Cambodia but that certainly applies to Cambodia as a ‘data-rich’ country. In general, existing data are seriously underutilized all over the world. The relative (high) cost of data-collection as compared to data-analysis makes one wonder what is behind this but the fact as such is well established. Apart from the well-known large representative surveys (census, HSEs and the Health and Demographic survey) a lot more interesting data sets are out there that might profit from re-analysis, meta-analysis and being linked with other sets.
- ❑ The above promotes much more intensive use of existing material. This theme has another, less ambitious but equally important variant: *preventing duplication of already existing work*, and identifying the white areas in existing knowledge, i.e. *assisting research programming*.
- ❑ One issue that immediately comes up when considering use of existing material is the availability of the data for use by researchers that were not involved in their collection. Given most of Cambodia’s research being contract work, and given the clauses in most contracts about ownership of data, the envisioned Cambodian Association of Social Science has an important *advocacy* mission awaiting it. Currently, most research funders, be they Cambodian (government) institutions or donors seem are unwilling to consider research information, whoever has paid for it, as a public good⁹. This is only one issue that offers itself for advocacy. A related issue is the research output copyrights to the funder clause that most contracts contain. But there are many more.
- ❑ Given the fact that systematic information is being collected anyway, it makes sense to think about the information resource as a database for answering (*science policy*) *research* questions such as: what are the trends in research topics? What is the total social research turnover? Who are the major research funders? Does it increase/decrease over the years? What part of it is controlled by foreign researchers? Does the ratio local/foreign-managed change over the years?

The last mentioned possibility shows that one has to carefully consider what (research project) information has to be gathered. I imagine that budgets of research projects, funders of research projects or complete lists of researchers (as opposed to only contact persons) might not be on the list of requirements of “normal” users. If the resource is to be used for exploring issues beyond the direct needs of users looking for expertise or research in a particular area this has to be reckoned with in the design phase. Although I am pretty sure that most research professionals will not immediately see the value of the availability of such information for their personal work, I would strongly argue to seriously consider taking these possibilities on board. It would be an important resource for the envisioned association of social science. E.g. turnover figures would constitute a good basis for a legitimate core funding proposal to a consortium of bigger research funders. Or rather than pursuing a core-funding strategy the association could consider a ‘corporate’ membership strategy to cover the costs of the infrastructural resources it manages. Here also, turnover figures would constitute a legitimate basis for the fee

⁹ Obviously, this concept allows for contractually agreed periods (e.g. 3 months or 6 months) during which the funder has priority rights.

structure. And it may well be that what was labeled a comparative disadvantage earlier, most of Cambodia's research being non-academic contract work, can be turned into a comparative advantage. If its research community rallies around a set of infrastructural resources that have much to offer to its broad constituency of research funders it might well succeed in securing long-term financial viability for tools that are difficult to create, let alone maintain, in context otherwise much more favorable to research interests.