

Interview Report

Commissioned by the Organizers of Mekong ICT Camp 2010

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Summary

The camp was a success, according participants' opinions. It's not just the seamless proceeding of the sessions, but also the available knowledge, ideas and network for future work they took home with, plus the transformation and friendship that they had experienced. Because participants' background are related to communication technology and technologically enabled solutions, they responded more strongly towards the sessions and facilitation that carried the following qualities: urgent and important measure (eg. security and fund-raising), simple and appropriate technologies (e.g. geo-chat and low-power radio), and direct relevance to their line of work.

Five days was a long time away from work and home but the momentum of learning, engaging and transforming was well kept because of the variety of session topics and activities, new friendship, inspired minds and projection of more possibilities for the immediate future. Participants showed high and all-around appreciation to camp organizers and facilitators. Dimitri, Sunil, Pete and Michael were the most mentioned among all. Their facilitations were regarded as highly important, immediately useful, practical, fun, hand-on and ready to deploy. Their personalities, rich knowledge and sound presentation skills were repeated in various interviews.

The diversity of participants' background have kept the camp in check, meaning that the camp was not only meant for the technology-savvy or pro-ICT minds, but also those who do not share mainstream opinions. Individuals' discontent and opinions are listed and interpreted in the follow section under the title "The Discontent - what they said and what we heard." Those opinions create a possible space for alternative curriculum and ways of organizing for future ones.

The provided sessions bred new things in two directions. One is the post-camp insights and questions and the other ideas for new actions. This author considers these questions self-explanatory thus list them in the separate sections without any further interpretation.

This author, as an outsider and an observant, must applaud the camp organizers for your streamlined and decisive leadership, unobtrusive but effective coordination and implementation. In addition, you'd placed the various elements into the camp to foster the dynamics fitting for the topic ICT and the relative younger generation. In sum, to borrow the words from one participant, we both wondered how your next camp in 2012 is going to exceed this one. We will be looking forward to that.

Take Aways: (Take-Aways from each session are listed in the Annex.)

Constructive opinions:

- (1) People at managerial positions anticipated more to hear updated and integrated information about ICT, about the region and the links between people, communication and technologies.
- (2) Expatriates and solidarity-generation (*Ann: no offence*) expressed the need for proactive regional thinking, networking and solutions.
- (3) The more widely actionable in terms of importance and feasibility after the camp are social network and security measures. Others are up to individual's line of work.
- (4) Un-conferencing and outing breathed oxygen to the camp dynamics.
- (5) Five days is a widely accepted time for camping.
- (6) Four factors for welcomed sessions: (i) high relevance to their work and aspiration, (ii) high importance of the topic, (iii) benefit organization's development and sustainability, and (iv) facilitators clear explanation and charisma, and with role-play, simulations and case studies in the sessions.
- (7) Would need brief introduction every session.
- (8) Would need more introduction of background information, as well as case studies and project showrooms, from the Mekong region
- (9) Should allow more time for locals to express their opinions.

What they said:

“I got knowledge and relationship more than I hope.”

What they said:

“This training shows how people, especially the younger generation, work and give strength to our work. The connections we developed, the solidarity, not just ICTs, are very important.”

What they said:

“Most people feel tired on the 5th day because there are too much to learn.”

What they said:

“It’s impressive, the sustainable way. We have a chance to join role play, to know how to demonstrate to donors.”

What they said:

- ◆ We get a lot of support and stimulation that I can put forward for my country.
- ◆ Learned about NGO - I have had wider views from different actors.
- ◆ I'm very impressed by the non-technical stuff. I plan to help them set up a system to build website. This was unexpected.
- ◆ This camp is a realization for me. I realize I need IT support and ensure my next projects.
- ◆ I change my attitude about ICT. NGO work is very important.
- ◆ Mekong was made sense by way of: 1) regional solidarity 2) appropriate ICT for Cambodia, Laos, Burma.
- ◆ I'm surprised to realize the existence of civil society in SE Asia, also longing for regional solutions.
- ◆ I'm more confident to tell people what I have intended to do.

What they said:

- ◆ I made one radio. I worked up to 2-3 am. This radio can broaden our topics in communities, so exciting.
- ◆ I've built low-power radios. I'm interested I can make things work.
- ◆ It's a hand-on workshop and we can could make device by ourselves.
- ◆ It's very engaging. We worked until midnight, very fun, not all were technical people. Pete isn't even a technical background.

What they said:

I come here not only for work, but my future career. In an organization, we can't think outside of box. I have more confidence now to show people what I am trying to do.

I have a clearer picture about Mekong Region. I want to start to write an external/internal communication plan. And I will share with colleagues about the new knowledge about Facebook, twitter, flickr, and blogging.

I have learned more about security and social networking. I want to find out what's the difference between these many social medium tools and what are the best for the purpose of fund-raising.

I see a quite different form of event organizing (application-only). It's a good example for our future activities. I also wonder about the effect of this camp. Forty participants don't sound a representable number for this region. It should be a bigger event for this regional community.

I've learned about geo-chart and Sahana. I'm curious the application of SMS but I couldn't go to that session.

I look at ICT differently. They are very important to NGO's work. I have to work more with volunteers. As a person, I think people are still peer to peer. For example, westerns and Mekong people have different cultures but we can still chat and understand despite the cultural and language difference. Sometimes we learn more.

What they said:

It's important to take actions. I want to know if these things can be implemented in next camp. We just listen here, it'll be nice when we become doers after the camp.

There are many new ideas for my work, and I have to talk to other participants to further implement these. I'm going to build a SMS gateway for health care with geo-chart with the Cambodia company.

I need to renovate my website, have a campaign about local wisdom with right message in photos and photo exhibition. I also want to use geo-chat with my group, start the design of it.

What they said:

Whether the community radio program can be used in Cambodia or not? To encourage social development and political participation, challenge is in rural areas. I hope to see it happen in Cambodia and I'll be happy to be part of it.

Possible to have a different relationship between government and NGOs?

How to make ICT sustainable, to sit together? How to make people to stay in touch?

I don't understand the wi-fi project (I'm not technical background). I don't know the importance of community radio.

I'm curious about how to report health data faster via ICT. For example, geo-chat need mobile phone, but in Burma, having a mobile phone is not that affordable even for quite some middle class Burmese.

About the idea of opening everything, I don't understand the concept, and I don't think like that.

I don't agree that in civil journalism, news is the thing that interests people. I think news can be more than that, even people are not interested, as long it can make an impact, it can be made into news.

Staying online is not the answer to many problems. We should turn off computers and go out to meet people.

How I can share? I want to stay connected with the facilitator to fill the gaps of knowledge.

(about the concept "open everything") It's the argument whether there will be more business opportunity. For example, "Open NZ". It raises new issues.

What they said:

If there is one period without any official session, not even simultaneous or ad-hoc, just open to people, to showcase participants' projects etc.

The interaction is better than I expected. I didn't like it when organizers said we must bring our laptops.

What they said:	What we heard:
<p>Re: Participants</p> <p>“For some sessions, people don’t have enough background.”</p> <p>“Too less participants, might not be too much effect (in regional efforts).”</p> <p>“The participants are quite varied, sometimes it’s difficult for them to communicate. There is gap between participants.”</p>	<p>When questioning the qualification of participants, Asian may be more shy and dependent, thus need more ice-breakers and mingling efforts.</p>
<p>Re: English as the primary language and the presence of Westerners</p> <p>“Should allow more time for locals to express their opinions. I wonder why there are so many Westerners.”</p> <p>“Speak only English, maybe need translator.”</p> <p>“On the last day, I can't comprehend anymore.”</p>	<p>More interaction and hand-on/role-play exercise and the balance of conferencing and un-conferencing are believed to be able balance this issue about language burden.</p> <p>Maybe there are some qualified Asian facilitators from the two years of Asian participants.</p>
<p>Re: Curriculum and contents</p> <p>(1) “Expect to listen to more projects going on in Mekong regions, real country situation. How is the relationship between journalists and government in Mekong countries.”</p> <p>“Should be bigger events for community.”</p> <p>(2) “Expect to have sessions related to finance, human resource and project management solutions.”</p> <p>(3) “I hope some simultaneous session could rotate, schedule is very full, so participants didn't get free space to go out and know people.”</p> <p>“expect to have more days, or less sessions. Interested in so many things. It’s too tight, packed in one day. Too many interesting things, but too short</p>	<p>(1) The camp has been more about providing information and knowledge and providing a venue for networking, less about reflecting the realities or issues in the region, especially wasn't enough leveling of the realization of the development urgency.</p> <p>(2) There are quite some NGO management software, including accounting, staff admen management and many others</p> <p>(3) There is always challenge with pace, selection of topics and simultaneous sessions, especially with a pre-fixed agenda. Pre-fixed agenda aren't participatory and can't demonstrate local issues and wisdom, nor the participants' characters. Organizing</p>

<p>time. Interested in too many things, but too less time.”</p> <p>“So big issues, not focus, time for discussion and practice is shorter than required.”</p> <p>“Presentation are too fast. We can't catch it.”</p> <p>“About citizen journalism, but no time to practice. Like low power radio, we had hand-on part, but in journalism, we didn't get to do it. ”</p>	<p>committee can consider some space for improvisation and walking meetings next time. There are examples of dynamic or semi-fixed conference agenda. Open Space is one.</p> <p>They like doing, talking and immersing in the discussed context.</p>
<p>Re. Facilitators</p> <p>“Some of the facilitators are not serious doing good session.”</p>	<p>This is one person opinion. If proven true, the facilitators shouldn't be invited again.</p>
<p>Re: Common courtesies and mutual respect</p> <p>“On arrival, Thai staff asked us not to take photographs, then Thai photographs took photographs of everyone without asking.”</p> <p>“I just was informed to make a report about Mekong few minutes before the sessions. I didn't know what “reporting Mekong” was, so we just talk about censorship. It'll be good have some description beforehand.”</p> <p>“Yesterday I didn't like “by-see”, it touches on religion. First, people have the right to know what the actual content should be about. Have the right to know.”</p>	<p>These are common courtesies. Staffers had been very polite and informative, but these request for permission and provision of important information were neglected, unintentionally of course.</p>
<p>Re. Promised actions</p> <p>“When asked what we'd do and how. I didn't like that. Too much expectations.</p> <p>“I don't want to think too much. I can't decide for my office but it's not up to me.”</p>	<p>Some participants were from junior positions or were not authorized or empowered enough to enjoy the spontaneous learning and new scenario that the camp represented.</p>

Annex

Interviewees' highlights of the sessions in retrospects

(Note: Here listed are feedback with specific information. General feedback like “the most impressive session was fund-raising.” and “I want to build a SMS gateway.” are not included.)

Name of Session	Highlights / Insights
Day 1 Organizational information policy and strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - about making communication plans for organizations. - a highly applicable session to build our own organization's security policy.
Community wifi project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - learnt how to configure a router, build ad-hoc connection to be in a same system.
News reporting as part of social movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - understood the steps about how to be a civil journalist, and about Malaysian media activism.
Awareness and Risk Assessment in Digital Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - learnt how OS works. - understood the digital tools about how to send information online safely, how to delete unneeded files completely, how to recover files and how to encrypt. These are easy to associate with everyone's work and life with computers. - became aware that how 'naked' we are on the internet. - learnt how to communicate with Burmese journalists safely. - learnt the non-technical way of communication. - I can teach people how to blog, esp. for the election (in Burma).
ICT public policy (net neutrality, piracy etc)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - learnt some basic concepts about ICT policy.
Day 2 Photo-documentary for social movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - learned how to contact media, how to contact the affected people, and how to bring public attention to the topics. - learnt that a single picture contains thousand of words. And how to take a convincing photo.
Information graphics and maps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - about how to make your presentation to convey your message, how to use graphics. At the end, they shared where to find relevant resources.
Universal access design and web accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - learnt how to design websites - how to design a good interface Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)
Low-powered radio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - how to set up small community radio - I'm in charge of some youth groups in Cambodia. This radio can broaden our topics. So exciting.
ICT for education and knowledge commons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - about communication channel and how to combine them to get the best effect. Easy to understand , highly applicable.
Digital information management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - learned how to identify the disruptive attacks to our websites and how to protect websites.
Day 3 Deploying large ICT system: Sahana	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - open-source ERP is applicable in the companies immediately. - is very useful for humanitarian aid work.

User-oriented design: geo-chat	- it can be applied to the org and my leadership, to share information, I want to ask permission to allow our group to become the members in the geo-chart to know what happens in Cambodia.
Sharing knowledge commons, open data and journalism 2.0	- the discussion about the relationship between government, organization and journalists opened my eyes. NGO are not in possession of statistics, hence no hard evidence for the advocated topics.
Day 4 Media Activism	- facilitator introduced URLs of some independent media. As a contract, Thai organizations use more traditional way of protest (at government offices or media space). Some just start to use social media.
Two sessions on social media	- what are the differences between so many social networking services? And what are the bestfor fund-raising.
Preparing/responding to denial of service attacks	- I can / should use these new knowledge right away for my work, it is what I need.
Day 5 Making CSO financially sustainable	- learnt how to fund-raise from donor through role-play. - learnt how to write a fundraising proposal. - learnt how to deal with companies and governments and how NGOs to be a broker in the middle.
Managing Information System Project (by Micahel Howden)	- learnt the procedure to access to information and its processing, very helpful for local NGOs' use of digital technology.