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EU Assistance on curbing Small Arms and light weapons in Cambodia

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Lessons learned from development-oriented SALW programmes: Reflections on experience in Cambodia

**A presentation given by David de Beer¹ on 14 April 2003
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“Integrating Small Arms and Light Weapons into Development Programmes”

1. Introduction:

Earlier this year, EU ASAC assisted the Cambodian Government in organising a weapons destruction ceremony in the provincial capital of Kampong Thom when over 3,200 weapons were destroyed by burning in a so-called “Flame of Peace”. As we drove through the town on the way to the stadium where thousands of people were gathered to watch and celebrate the destruction of so many weapons, we could read the colourful banners stretched across the street. The English was not always perfect: “Acclaim Weapons Distroyment at Kampong Thom”, “Bravo! Peaceful Flame” and then the most telling banner of all, “The Peace causes the Development”.

Here perhaps is an important lesson learned, as expressed by the Cambodian authorities themselves: a successful small arms programme contributes to the spread of peace and security in the country and this will bring with it further development.

2. Development-oriented SALW programmes:

2.1 To be honest, the EU ASAC programme in Cambodia is not specifically a development-oriented programme: it is an integrated, multi-faceted approach to the general problem of SALW in Cambodia, presently having five inter-linked components: improving the legal SALW framework; improving weapons management for the military and the police; weapons destruction; public awareness as well as the Weapons for Development (WfD) component.

¹ David de Beer has been Project Manager of EU ASAC and European Union Special Adviser since January 2002.



2.2 Choice of WfD target areas:

At the beginning of its operations in Cambodia in April 2000, EU ASAC began planning a WfD programme. Consultations were held with the government, not so much on where development was needed, but where the areas were where illegal ownership of small arms caused the greatest number of problems. Two districts were chosen for WfD pilot projects. The first was Snuol in Kratie province where the security situation was so bad that no development organisation dared to work there and the first EU ASAC missions had to be accompanied by armed guards to ensure their safety. The second was Bakan in Pursat province, which had also been the scene of heavy fighting in the past, but where several development agencies were already operating.

2.3 Design of large-scale WfD projects:

Similar, what we call large-scale, comprehensive projects were designed for both Snuol and Bakan:

- national, Phnom Penh-based NGO's were hired to undertake public awareness activities on the dangers of SALW and to encourage villagers to hand in their weapons;
- a local field manager was employed to make contracts with each Village Development Council that they would get a development object if they handed in a sufficient number of weapons;
- in Snuol a contract was signed with an institutional development agency working in a neighbouring district to drill and construct the water wells and other development objects. In Bakan the government-run Provincial Rural Development Committee implemented the development objects which were larger in nature than in Snuol;
- the police in the districts were trained in human rights and community relations so that the villagers would have more trust in the police to provide security;
- the inadequately equipped police were given motorbikes, mountain bikes, two-way radio's and office equipment to improve both their visibility and response times;
- in an attempt to cut down on police corruption (with a salary as low as US\$ 15 per month, the police are forced to be corrupt in order to survive) a detailed programme improving the income of the police family was begun. This generally involved working with the wives of the policemen.

2.4 Results:

Over a period of 20 months 3,251 weapons were collected in Snuol and 2,442 weapons in Bakan. Most importantly the security situation in both districts improved dramatically and the villagers felt that the police were doing a better job than before. In Snuol other development agencies are now prepared to work in the district considered too dangerous three years ago. However this all had a heavy financial price tag for two small isolated districts in Cambodia: Snuol cost US\$ 442,658 and Bakan US\$ 291,291².

² Of these amounts development incentives and police support cost US\$ 274,250 in Snuol and US\$ 118,495 in Bakan.



2.5 Lessons Learned from comprehensive, large-scale WfD projects:

2.5.1 In Snuol water wells brought the development resulting from WfD very close to the people. In Bakan no water wells were built and the larger development projects such as schools, road repair, and repairs to police stations are more removed from many people who handed in weapons. On the other hand, a small survey done in Snuol when most of the weapons had been collected indicated that for many people “improved peace and security” was sufficient for them to feel they had done the correct thing in surrendering their weapons. While water wells were appreciated, the improved security was appreciated more.³

2.5.2 In Cambodia the large-scale WfD projects do not really fit into a 12-month, January-to-December, project cycle that EU ASAC requires because of the way it is funded by the European Commission in Brussels. 90% of the weapons were collected in the first eight months. Implementing the development projects over the next 12 months virtually turned EU ASAC into a development organisation for nearly a year, thereby extensively limiting its real core business: collection, destruction and management of weapons. Senior officials in the Cambodian government also began to regard EU ASAC as not much more than a development organisation. However, the comprehensive approach of public awareness trainings; networking in the villages; training the police in community relations; improving their equipment and increasing police family income to reduce corruption certainly proved its value.

2.6 Small NGO WfD Projects

In 2002 EU ASAC branched out into seven small-scale WfD projects that were implemented by local NGO's. Part of the rationale was to limit the intensity of management required by the large-scale projects and develop a project cycle that was limited to one year, as EU ASAC can only make financial commitments on a year-by-year basis. Contracts were signed with each NGO to conduct public awareness and training sessions that were held largely in local pagodas. EU ASAC produced its own training materials so we could be sure of what the local NGO's were teaching. The materials included two specially commissioned video productions on the effects of illegal weapons possession in the local communities. In co-operation with the local police, the NGO's kept track of the number of weapons handed in after the training sessions and the NGO's were allocated a budget to build water wells for the villagers where sufficient weapons had been handed in. In theory this approach should have required less management time by EU ASAC staff. However this was an underestimation on our part. Some of the NGO's were good at training and weapons collection, but did not handle the well-building process in a satisfactory manner. Other NGO's were not very effective public awareness trainers, but could build good wells. Luckily some of the NGO's were both. In a survey carried out in the villages where the public awareness training took place, 83% of the participants reported significant improvement in the security in their villages. The seven projects cost US\$ 167,824⁴. Over 3,000 weapons and almost 3,000 UXO's and rounds of ammunition were collected. Importantly for EU ASAC the concept of a one year project-cycle held.

³ To interpret this reaction, it must be realised that the security situation in Snuol before the WfD project began was much worse than in Bakan.

⁴ Of this amount US\$ 29,480 was spent on 90 water wells.



2.7 2003: NGO Lite Projects

Learning from past experience, in 2003 EU ASAC has switched to a new concept, spontaneously dubbed by Owen Greene as the “NGO Lite” project. The development component of WfD has been removed from the responsibility of the NGO’s.

There are two scenarios. In both scenarios EU ASAC has signed contracts with local NGO’s, but only to conduct public awareness trainings on the need to hand in weapons held by the local population. An important addition has been made in that it has also been possible to add training courses in community relations for the local police in the districts where the NGO’s are working.

In Scenario One the only change with the small NGO approach used in 2002 is that the NGO is no longer responsible for providing the water wells. When weapons have been handed in, EU ASAC itself will decide where water wells are to be built and will put this work out to public tender by local contractors. This will ensure the quality of the water wells.

In Scenario Two, there is an alternative development option. The local NGO’s are conducting public awareness activities in target areas of institutional development organisations and aim at providing an added sustainable security value to the development implemented by each agency. The theme of the public awareness is not: “Hand in your weapons and we will give you a water well”, but rather “By handing in your weapons, you are improving the security of your community and the development that is taking place will be of greater benefit and become more long lasting”. Development is no longer a reward for handing in weapons: increased security that will maximise present development and possibly attract new development is the reward for handing in weapons. The development agencies GTZ, CARE Australia, CWS (Church World Service) and LWF (Lutheran World Federation) are already co-operating in such NGO Lite projects. In this way the “traditional” development agencies are being exposed to the concept of weapons collection and security, and are seeing the need to increase communal security in their target areas as a prerequisite for stable development.

3. Conclusion

3.1 EU ASAC is still experimenting and developing concepts of WfD to fit its needs. But what started off in April 2001 as a self-contained comprehensive WfD programme has over a period of two years – partly because of managerial, financial and developmental constraints – developed into a weapons collection and public awareness programme that provides a security and stability element as “added-value” to the work of institutional development agencies.

3.2 The NGO Lite approach is changing the nature of EU ASAC’s involvement in WfD. This means EU ASAC has less and less responsibility for implementing development and can concentrate on its core activities of weapons collection, management and destruction each of which adds to the stability of Cambodia and therefore plays a role in securing the further development of the country.

I thank you for your attention.