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JOURNEY TO SELF-RELIANCE

Case Study of Capacity Development in Cambodia

What conditions make it possible to accomplish significant capacity development without running any workshops, without requiring any explicit project deliverables, and with only three short-term technical assistance trips over the course of 19 months?

The All Children Reading–Cambodia Activity has been supporting the Education Quality Assurance Department (EQAD) of the education ministry in Cambodia since February 2017. An EQAD staffer, asked about the assistance, said, *"The value of the support … is more than I can express….Through collaboration with [the project], EQAD has developed remarkably."* This case study examines how a different approach to providing technical assistance helped EQAD make those "remarkable" strides toward self-reliance.

In the spring of 2015, USAID commissioned a review of the early grade reading sector in Cambodia. At that time, EQAD was relatively newly formed. Its mandate included developing and implementing national assessments, as well as analyzing and presenting the results of those assessments. The leadership of the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) placed an emphasis on being able to measure and monitor system outcomes at the student level. National assessments for reading and math in grades 3, 6, and 8 were instituted as means to do just that. The USAID sector review found that some improvements to the national assessments could be made but, more importantly, indicated the need to help EQAD

make better use of assessment data to inform policy decision-making and improvement efforts.

EQAD, as Cambodia's main vehicle for sharing national assessment outcomes, issued analytical reports. A multi-donor capacity development fund paid for consultant technical assistance that completed most of the analyses and wrote the reports for EQAD. In February 2017, All Children Reading–Cambodia provided its first round of technical assistance for the reporting effort. A two-person team arrived in Phnom Penh under a scope of work aimed specifically at improving the quality, relevance, and utility of the national assessment reports, with a focus

on the grade 3 assessment as the one most relevant to USAID's focus on early grades.

In the team's first meetings with EQAD staff, EQAD made clear its immediate priority was the grade 6 national assessment—revising the report and developing a presentation on grade 6 results, since the grade 6 exam had been administered near the end of the prior school year. All Children Reading's team was faced with a choice: Stick to a strict interpretation of their scope of work—which gave priority to grade 3—or respond to the immediate concern of their ministry colleagues? After consultation with USAID, the team reoriented its technical assistance to focus on a learn-by-doing approach that would help EQAD revise the grade 6 report (which consultants had produced) and develop the presentation the office was under the gun to complete. No workshop was held, but each day the two technical advisors would sit with the EQAD team and work through what EQAD was required to produce to meet a fast-approaching deadline.

Focusing on a product that ministry counterparts were accountable for delivering, not on one that the advisors felt they needed to produce to check off as a project deliverable, meant that the technical assistance team found EQAD colleagues more open to the support and guidance the team could provide. For example, when the team suggested that EQAD identify primary audiences for the report and presentation, and encouraged the department to consult with those audiences regarding the kind of information that would be meaningful to them, EQAD welcomed that input as a way to improve its final products.

With that "end-user" input in hand, it became apparent that the existing national assessment reports were not doing a good job communicating the key messages emerging from the data. In particular, the reports were not reaching provincial and district education officers, who were not even aware of past assessment results. Knowing this, it was easy for the team and EQAD to come up with the idea of producing one- to two-page leaflets that could convey the main findings to a much wider audience than the technical report might have. These leaflets for the grade 3 and grade 6 assessment results were, therefore, unanticipated project outputs (not in the original scope of work) that the technical assistance team and EQAD jointly committed to producing.

Two weeks spent working side-by-side on deliverables that EQAD was under pressure to produce afforded the outside experts not only the opportunity to lend direct support to EQAD, and develop the department's capacity while doing so, but also a firsthand view into the strengths and weaknesses of the EQAD technical staff. The technical advisors combined this informal, but very useful, set of observations regarding EQAD's capacity with a more structured set of interviews and information gathering to fully identify the areas of capacity development that would help EQAD become more fully self-sufficient in analysis, report writing, and development of dissemination products. Therefore, another outcome of the on-the-fly adjustments made to the technical assistance team's scope of work with EQAD was a capacity assessment, which would form the basis for the development of a joint plan for future collaboration.
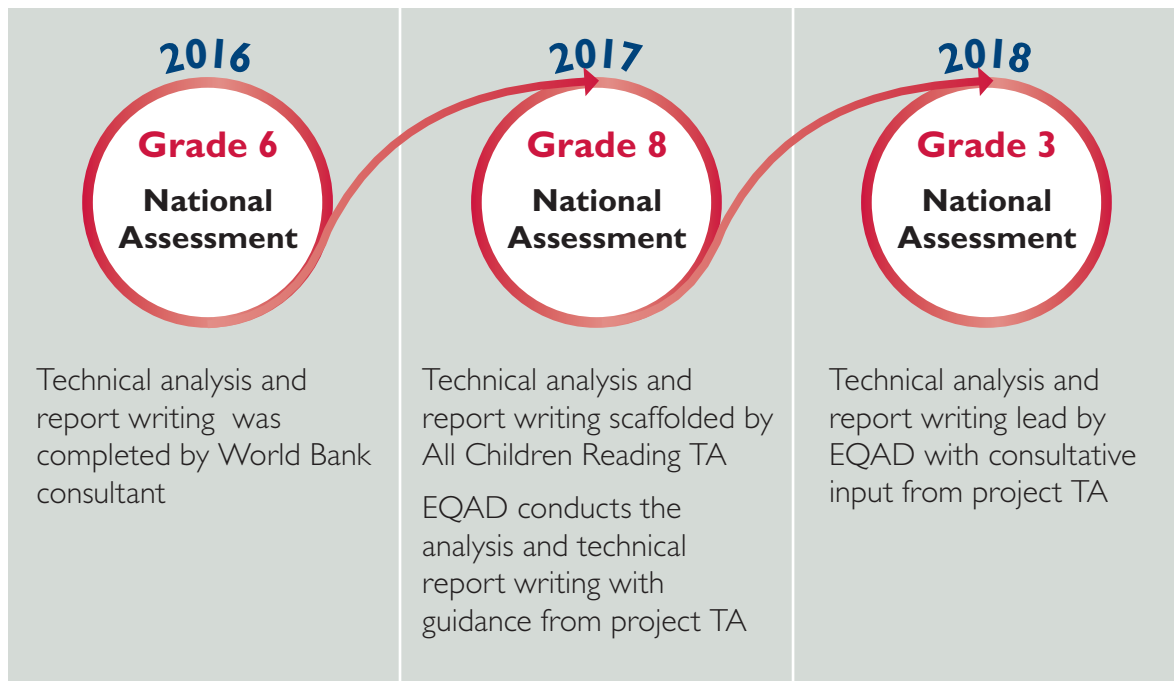
The time spent helping EQAD produce their own deliverables helped All Children Reading–Cambodia gain the department's trust and form a solid working relationship. When the report, presentation, and leaflets that EQAD was helped to produce received praise from leadership at the MoEYS, and from the wider community of education stakeholders, the EQAD team was appreciative of how the project had supported them and had helped them shine. They therefore eagerly sought out additional support for the ongoing analytical and reporting requirements they would face.

Now, it is important to note that because of the three-year testing cycle used in Cambodia, a grade 3 assessment (the one most relevant to All Children Reading–Cambodia and USAID) was not scheduled until 2019. The next scheduled assessment, for which EQAD again requested help, was of grade 8. Once again, USAID had a choice—go along with what ministry counterparts needed, or adhere to a strict interpretation of the project and Agency focus.

USAID and All Children Reading huddled together and thought through what to do. Everyone agreed that EQAD's capacity development was an important ingredient in helping Cambodia more self-sufficiently monitor and improve primary education. And everyone recognized that the analytical, report writing, and product development skills EQAD would need to apply to the grade 8 assessment were the same ones they would use when working on the grade 3 assessment, just at a later date. All Children Reading–Cambodia got the go ahead from USAID to support EQAD's grade 8 work and to develop a longer-term capacity development plan with EQAD.

The next critical factor that would determine the success, or failure, of ongoing capacity development efforts, was the approach that would be taken. What roles should additional technical assistance be asked to play? What kind of training or other modalities would be best suited to addressing the needs identified in the capacity assessment

Figure 1. Technical assistance approach

2016

Grade 6
National Assessment

Technical analysis and report writing was completed by World Bank consultant

2017

Grade 8
National Assessment

Technical analysis and report writing scaffolded by All Children Reading TA

EQAD conducts the analysis and technical report writing with guidance from project TA

2018

Grade 3
National Assessment

Technical analysis and report writing lead by EQAD with consultative input from project TA

mentioned above? How much technical assistance would be needed, when, and in what form? Getting these questions right would determine whether the project could truly help EQAD, and therefore the MoEYS, be more self-sufficient in this critical area of making available and using national assessment data.

One of the technical advisors from the February trip was requested to return to Cambodia in July 2017 to assist EQAD with the design of the sampling framework for the Grade 8 National Assessment scheduled for that August. While there, the advisor worked with EQAD to develop a joint plan for how additional assistance could support the analysis, report writing, and dissemination product development for that grade 8 test—and for future tests. The diagram below summarizes the approach the project and EQAD agreed to take.

Here is a specific example of how the technical assistance scaffolded EQAD to play a greater role in the analysis and report writing for the 2017 grade 8 assessment. Working together at distance—using email, Skype, and phone calls—the team reviewed previous reports (the ones prepared by external consultants), and the project technical advisor and EQAD agreed on which aspects were worth keeping, which analyses could be added, and what the overall structure of the report should be. A report shell was therefore created as a framework that EQAD staff could follow. EQAD proceeded to conduct the analyses and flesh out the different sections of that

framework, with the technical advisor on call to answer questions, advise on analytical approaches or methods, or provide SPSS coding tips only when needed or wanted. A full draft of the report was produced with the two parties collaborating across more than 10,000 miles. Working collaboratively in this way, with EQAD requesting assistance as needed, the technical advisor was able to gain additional insight into areas where counterparts' skills were strong and where specific kinds of technical assistance and skills development would be most useful.

A final important ingredient in this process was the identification of specific milestones that would signal that progress was indeed being made. The following table summarizes another explicit agreement that was reached between the project and EQAD—so that both parties could hold each other accountable for meeting the milestones and thus allowing EQAD to eventually handle the analysis, report writing, and dissemination product development fully self-sufficiently.

Of course, not everything unfolded as planned. MoEYS counterparts, as often is the case, struggled to protect their time to work on the outputs they were responsible for. Timelines and plans rarely were stuck to, and dates for accomplishing work were often juggled and readjusted as things went forward. But some basic important elements of the relationship and the ways of working did change, and the changes gave all involved parties—EQAD, the project, the technical advisors, and USAID—a clear

Figure 2. Outputs and milestones

OUTPUTS	OUTPUT COMPLETED BY	
	2017 Grade 8 National Assessment	**2018 Grade 3** National Assessment
Creation of templates Flyer (2 pages) Technical brief (4-6 pages) Technical report (100+ pages)	**Project TA**	**EQAD** (Adapted from 2017)
SPSS code for weights and sampling plan	**Project TA**	**EQAD**
Technical Process Manual	**Project TA**	**EQAD** (Adapted from 2017)
SPSS code for table creation	**EQAD**	**EQAD** (Adapted from 2017)
Completion of dissemination production Flyer (2 pages) Technical brief (4-6 pages) Technical report (100+ pages)	**EQAD**	**EQAD**

picture of what increasing self-sufficiency would look like. Most importantly, this way of working has engendered a degree of buy-in and ownership that more traditional approaches to technical assistance provision (workshops, trainings, consultants producing reports) often fail to generate. In a way, the typical question of ownership is almost inappropriate in this case. The outputs and outcomes being pursued are the ones EQAD is responsible for producing—which by definition are ones they "own." These outcomes may not be the ones the project expected to deliver (as the grade 8 assessment report and flyer had little—at first glance—to do with the work of an early grade reading program), but so what?

If the goal is capacity development, then all stakeholders can recognize that the capacity needed to do the work for grade 8 is the same capacity that will be called on to do it for grade 3, as shown in the table above. By being patient enough to recognize that by serving EQAD's immediate needs, the project would meet its longer-term goal of developing capacity in an area more aligned to the project's goals. Whatever grade assessment was being worked on, capacity was being developed to analyze, disseminate, and use data to inform decision-making— and it was being done in a way that had counterparts committed to and leading the work.