

## **Background Paper**

### **For the Launching of COPCEL Phase II**

#### **COPCEL Phase I**

In early 1999, Mrs. Caroline Hughes and Mrs. Real Sopheap, from the Cambodian Development Resource Institute (CDRI), conducted research on “The Nature and Causes of Conflict Escalation in the 1998 National Election”. Its findings were presented at a national conference in which participants from the government, civil society and the international community agreed to support a conflict prevention mechanism called COPCEL, which stands for Conflict Prevention in Cambodian Elections. From August 1999 to September 2003, the Centre for Peace and Development (CPD), the CDRI’s peace programme, organised 50 consecutive COPCEL monthly roundtable meetings without interruption. COPCEL Phase I was then supported by USAID and the Asia Foundation.

Key potential sources of conflict during the commune council elections in 2002 and the national election in 2003 were debated again and again by the main stakeholders from all constituencies. It is true that in Cambodian elections now and probably in the foreseeable future, some conflicts will remain without complete resolution because they are linked so closely with the political situation of the country. However, national and international opinion acknowledges that the Cambodian electoral process has made consistent and steady progress, and COPCEL has planted the culture of open discussion among key election participants. New post-conflict societies like Afghanistan and East Timor have sent representatives to meet with CDRI policy officers to learn the experiences of COPCEL. This culture of dialogue is highly important, particularly in a society which has been through a devastating war lasting almost three decades. This culture needs to be well cared for and its momentum maintained.

#### **The Need for COPCEL Phase II**

From 2006 to 2008, Cambodia will have to organise three elections: for the Senate in January 2006, for commune councils in early 2007 and the national election around July 2008. With the cooperation of Mr. OK SEREI Sopheap, the initiator of the COPCEL process in 1999, CDRI at the end of 2004 organised many meetings with concerned partners and stakeholders from state institutions, NGOs, political parties and the international community. It also conducted a survey with a broad range of constituents who responded positively. All agreed that in order to manage and prevent potential conflicts from spreading during the three coming elections, the COPCEL mechanism needs to be reactivated in COPCEL Phase II.

Having been informed of this general wish to see the COPCEL process renewed, many donors have expressed to CDRI their willingness to support financially COPCEL Phase II. At the end of May 2005, UNDP signed a three-year agreement to support COPCEL Phase II. In early June 2005, CDRI signed a three-year contract for Mr. OK SEREI Sopheap to be permanent facilitator of COPCEL Phase II.

#### **The COPCEL Phase II Mechanism**

COPCEL I provided many lessons to Cambodia in the management and prevention of conflicts in elections. Both positive and negative experiences in COPCEL I have taught us how to operate the mechanism more effectively. In COPCEL I, the discussion was conducted only at the national level and in Phnom Penh, with participants coming from state institutions, NGOs and civil society, political parties and the international community. In COPCEL II, we will add other structures to ensure that the culture of dialogue penetrates to the grassroots

and spreads more widely among the population. Along this line, we have split COPCEL II into six structures.

We will begin with a launching conference to start COPCEL Phase II officially. This will be held on Thursday, 14 July 2005, at the Phnom Penh Hotel.

The second structure is called COPCELCOM (COPCEL Core Meetings). These roundtable meetings will be organised monthly, or more often if requested by the members. At this level, the participants will be experts who are recognised as having wide experience on legal and other technical issues in different phases of the electoral process. The first COPCELCOM is scheduled to take place in August 2005, a month after the launching conference.

The third structure is called COPCELEM (COPCEL Enlarged Meetings). These roundtable meetings will be quarterly, or more often if requested by the participants, who will come from all concerned election circles. This is very similar to the COPCEL I monthly meetings. The first COPCELEM is planned for September 2005.

The fourth structure is called COPCELPROM (COPCEL Provincial Meetings). During the next three years, we aim to organise at least 46 roundtable meetings in all 24 provinces and municipalities of the kingdom, or more if requested by the participants and in accordance with the situation. At this level, participation will be wider than at the national level, especially from the commune councils. We envision that cooperation between the government, civil society and the international community will give increasing priority to grassroots institutions and players in all sectors of development. In this context, we confidently believe in strengthening the culture of dialogue because it represents the core of real development owned by the people. The first COPCELPROM is planned for November 2005, with a needs assessment visit in October 2005 to the first region, composed of four provinces: Takeo, Kampot, Sihanoukville and Kompong Speu.

The fifth structure is called COPCELMED (COPCEL Media). In Cambodia today, public opinion recognises that the media have made a lot of progress. Debate through the electronic media has been conducted quite extensively. We believe that in the election process, there are issues such as security that need to be debated with a strong participation by the public. In COPCEL II, we intend to use the media network to promote direct participation of the people in debating election issues. We will try to work in such a way that the grassroots population will have the opportunity to provide inputs through COPCEL.

The last structure will be the closing conference, officially completing COPCEL Phase II. Together we will evaluate the whole three years' experiences and document the lessons for Cambodia, for the next generation and for other countries that wish to learn from the COPCEL process.

We strongly believe that to prevent or manage conflicts in elections as well as in other areas, we need an appropriate schedule and the strong good will of all the players who are linked to those conflicts. The culture of permanent dialogue, which is a core element of the culture of peace, is a key factor that will generate resolutions which all parties in conflict feel confident that they can accept.

Through COPCEL, CDRI has initiated a truly neutral forum in which all actors have engaged without fear to build jointly a culture of dialogue in order to prevent or manage conflicts in Cambodian elections. We are convinced that the resolution of conflicts starts with open discussion about them and with true respect for each others' stands and opinions, and that discussion of present conflicts is a joint journey toward their resolution tomorrow.