

“How to Work Effectively as a Spokesperson”

Workshop & Simulation

From the 18th to the 19th of August Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung invited 10 journalists and 26 spokespersons from various government ministries, provincial and municipal administrations in order to raise their awareness of a spokesperson’s role and discuss ways of improving their own role and responsibilities.

Since 2011 KAS Cambodia has actively promoted the setup of spokesperson units at the provincial level. As of 2013, all provincial governments had installed a spokesperson, while at the national level spokespersons had been announced for each ministry respectively. Experiences among the spokespersons however vary tremendously. Therefore this workshop intended to fill in the gaps in order to build confidence among the participants and thus to ensure regular credible and reliable information sharing with the public on the national and sub-national level. In the long run such efforts will lead to a more satisfactory level of trust between officials, the public and the media and contribute to more transparency.

To achieve these long- and short run goals KAS, throughout the workshop, combined a series of activity-based simulations with first hand expert advice from Alastair Carthew, journalist, public relations expert and KAS consultant. Furthermore participants learned about the organization of press conferences by the German government through various examples and video-supported presentations.

The workshop was opened on August the 18th with speeches of Denis Schrey and

Alastair Carthew. They recalled that in a world of ever-growing access to information effective communication plays an increasingly important role. Since spokespersons display the “human face” of an organization, they highlighted the importance of a professional appearance, well-preparedness and far-reaching understanding of the audience, meaning first and foremost the media as the major mediating institution between official bodies and the public. Alongside these rather theoretical reflections they transmitted rather pragmatic recommendations such as how to dress, speak, act and react and many more. Their introductory speeches were supplemented by short illustrative video-clips.

Practicing Public Relations – Realistic Role Plays and Simulations

During the first afternoon the workshop turned into a more practical event. Representatives from the different provinces and Phnom Penh City and Khans and ministries were paired up with attending journalists and handed out highly topical and controversial scenarios regarding their respective ministries and provinces. These covered a broad range like women’s affairs, labor, economy, the environment and the like. Given some time to prepare, they then found themselves in short one-on-one interview simulations recorded by video. The controversial nature of the scenarios gave the journalists the opportunity to ask demanding questions aiming to promote a critical culture between journalists and spokespersons, which so far remains in its infancy in Cambodia. Subsequent video-analysis revealed a broad base of skills and

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an eagerness to learn, among all participants that could be built on.

To a large degree participants managed to put advices into effect. In addition individual minor shortcomings like taking too much time or not constantly looking at the interviewer were made aware by means of video-recording. This way they were analyzed in direct interaction between Alastair Carthew, the respective spokesperson and an active audience, that critically evaluated the respective performances.

The first day was completed with another round of discussions between government officials, journalists and KAS experts. Here participants were able to forward questions and comments that were not a direct topic of the Workshop but rather concerned the specifics of the Cambodian context. Among those were concerns how to raise awareness among the public for institutionalized information-release-mechanisms such as press-conferences or how to promote a culture of critical yet cooperative mutual exchange.

The second day started with an introduction into the concept of the "Federal Press Conference" in Germany by Denis Schrey. Attendees seemed to be highly interested in this very regular and well-structured format asking detailed questions about how it works, how it came into being and how it would be possible to transfer it to the Cambodian national context. Thereafter they themselves were asked to simulate press-conferences in small groups, announce moderators and engage with questions of actual journalists. Sessions were held in the presence of external journalists reporting on the workshop for the local news. Furthermore performances were again recorded on video and rooms were set up in a certain way. All that made the role play seem very realistic in order to teach the moderators, in the most natural setting, how to introduce speakers, identify questioners and handle complicated questions most effectively.

All practical trainings and simulations were overseen by Mr. Chhay Sophal, Editor-in-Chief of Cambodian News and Pen Bona,

Editor-in-Chief of the Cambodge Soir Newspaper. As both are members of the Club of Cambodian Journalists they were able to provide experienced assistance from a national background to Alastair Carthew. Simultaneous translation either to English or Khmer, during both days, assured mutual understanding and problem-free communication among native and foreign attendees.

Again videos were analyzed and performances of the participants were evaluated by the experts. Once more Alastair Carthew found that there was a vital basis to build upon in further trainings.

Closing the Conference – Key Notes of the Experts and the Minister of Information

Finally after two days of close collaboration with active participation of all attendees the conference was rounded by key recommendations of Khieu Kannharith, the Minister of Information who stressed the importance of professional communication by government agencies with the media. He especially highlighted the need for strong internal communication lines especially between the decision maker (Minister/Governor) and the spokesperson's. Without their regular interactions and communication the information dissemination would risk failing. He also reiterated the need for decision makers to professionally deal with the media and to provide them interesting, relevant and user friendly information through their spokespersons and PR departments. Finally he welcomed KAS initiative to support the organization of regular press conferences by the government.