

# NGO specialized in aid to landmine victims finds benefits in ISO 9001:2000



The Cambodia Trust (CT) specializes in providing artificial limbs and braces to people with disabilities, many of them landmine victims and polio sufferers. It is one of only a handful of organizations in Cambodia with ISO 9001:2000 certification, one of the very few non-governmental organizations in the world to achieve this and possibly the first of these in a developing country.

BY EOGHAN WALSH AND TANG KEA

**T**he Cambodia Trust (CT)<sup>1)</sup> is one of only a handful of organizations in Cambodia with ISO 9001:2000 certification. What is unusual about CT, however, is that it is a non-governmental organization (NGO) – one of the very few NGO's in the world with ISO 9001:2000 and the first – as far as we are aware – in a developing country to achieve certification to this standard.

Some people are sceptical about the idea of applying ISO 9001:2000 to an NGO – but there is no reason why it should not be used. In fact, there are many extra benefits NGO's can enjoy from ISO 9001:2000 implementation compared to the more traditional profit-based organizations which have increasingly begun to adopt the standard.

## The Cambodia Trust

Since 1990, CT has been providing artificial limbs and braces to people with disabilities in Cambodia (left), many of them landmine victims and polio sufferers. Now with over 100 staff (more than 90% of whom are Cambodian and 20% of these themselves people with disabilities), three clinics and a world-class School of Prosthetics and Orthotics, CT has been looking at ways to strengthen the organization and hand over the complete running of the Trust's project in Cambodia to the local Cambodian staff.

ISO 9001:2000 has been the mainstay of an extensive "Institutional Strengthening Project" funded by the New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZ Aid – [www.nzaid.govt.nz](http://www.nzaid.govt.nz)), with the Trust



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achieving certification in March 2002 by BM TRADA Certification Ltd.<sup>2)</sup>

What are the differences for an NGO implementing ISO 9001:2000 compared to a for-profit business? Not many, says Quality Manager, Tang Kea. "Some businesses want ISO 9001:2000 because they are interested in getting more customers. Our customers do not pay for the service, so we are mainly interested in improving the quality of service to them."

ISO 9001:2000 is principally a tool for continual improvement of systems and procedures rather than for profit making. An NGO has its internal and external customers like a for-profit business. However, typically for an NGO, it is not the recipient of the

service that pays for it, but another stakeholder, the donor. Importantly, ISO 9001:2000 provides a mechanism for the NGO to be accountable to its two important external customers: the recipient and the donor.

### Organizational learning

CT's original motivation in seeking certification was to build the capacity of local staff. This was important both for running the organization and for preparing the eventual transfer of the management of the school and clinics to Cambodians. Tang Kea describes the process:

"The first issue was meeting the challenge of working towards sustainability. How could we ensure that our organization could continue to provide excellence of service to our patients and to our students in the future without the level of external help we have now? We had to make our systems and procedures strong enough to work even when the individuals who helped set them up were no longer around."

Kathleen Biggs, CT Country Director in Cambodia concurs: "Typically NGO's, especially the smaller ones, don't have the organizational strength, or local staff have not been given the skills and opportunities to manage projects or generate funding proposals in a way that attracts donors."



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The certification process has helped build this capacity in the local staff (above). Much of the training undertaken for the ISO 9001:2000 project has developed skills which

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have a positive spill-over effect into other areas, such as setting objectives, strategic planning and in writing reports, or funding proposals.

Another major benefit of the ISO 9001:2000 process was the empowerment of local staff. CT adopted a team-based approach to implementation. Team leaders in each of CT's functional and geographical areas explained the ideas behind ISO 9001:2000 and why each staff member's input into developing the work instructions was necessary.

This was particularly important in Cambodia which has a culture of accepting decisions of people in authority without critically evaluating them. "People do not want to take risks, they want to be told what to do. They do not want to say there is a problem, because they fear they will be punished", says Tang Kea.

The process of consultation inherent in ISO 9001:2000 made it clear to staff that not only was their input welcome, but their contributions were also an essential feature of an effective ISO 9001:2000 implementation.

### Individual learning

While ISO 9001:2000 was a significant element of the Institutional Strengthening Project, a number of other things had to be put in place before certification could be achieved.

Implementing ISO 9001:2000 in a developing country involves a number of specific challenges: developing the concepts of continual improvement and customer focus, getting to know terminology and concepts of ISO 9001:2000, both of which proved daunting to the Cambodian staff working in a foreign language – English. However, such was the commitment by management and staff to the ISO 9001:2000 project



that many CT employees accepted the language and computer training necessary to implement the quality system.

However, the bulk of training expenditure was on understanding the essence of the ISO 9001:2000 philosophy and developing skills for self-

audit, report writing, objective setting and going through questionnaires with patients. This training facilitated a change in organizational culture. Staff soon realised this was not something being imposed from above by management, but

was helping directly with their personal and professional development.

A culture of quality developed within the organization which has now become fully assimilated into daily work practices. Three of CT's staff recently gained lead auditor accreditation and are using their skills

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to help other NGO's in the area who are interested in adopting ISO 9001:2000.

The customer focus of ISO 9001:2000 helped the Trust overcome another challenge faced by NGO's. As recipients generally do not pay for an NGO's services, they can be slow to criticise the level of service, or to offer constructive feedback.

In addition, staff may not feel the need to treat recipients as customers whose wants and needs must be taken into account. The ISO 9001:2000 emphasis on customer satisfaction helped staff refocus on how best to serve the beneficiary – in this case, the patient.

Regular patient surveys are now carried out which alert front-line staff to patient needs. The surveys have shown that patients are often ill at ease in the new and unusual sur-

roundings of the clinic, so staff make a greater effort to ensure they feel at home.

The ISO 9001:2000 process has streamlined the accessing of patient records, in turn reducing the time patients are kept waiting and staff spend looking for files by 50%. It has also shown staff that while patients do not pay for the service, if customers do not continue coming to

the clinic, the staff will not have continued employment.

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### Costs

A frequent question from other NGO's considering the adoption of ISO 9001:2000 is the expense. It is complex to cost this as it depends on so many factors – size of the organization, current level of staff training, extent to which expertise can be bought in locally as opposed to from abroad, etc..

For CT, it was part of the broader Institutional Strengthening Project, so a lot of the capacity building the Trust invested in for ISO 9001:2000 would have been carried out anyway. The direct costs of achieving and maintaining certification have been in the order of USD 10 000 for the first two years.

While all the indirect costs and the direct and indirect benefits have not yet been quantified, there is a strong feeling that ISO 9001:2000 has already paid for itself. In one area, the polypropylene draping process, improved training combined with calibration of oven temperatures, wastage has dropped to 5% of the pre-ISO 9001:2000 levels.

One major benefit was the reaction of a visiting delegation from the Japanese Rotary Club who saw the ISO 9001:2000 certificate on the wall. The delegates were so impressed that a Cambodian NGO had achieved ISO



9001:2000 certification that they committed additional funding to CT over the coming years.

### Overseas expansion

CT has plans to expand its operations and transplant the organizational structures to a new school and major national clinic planned for Sri Lanka, and a smaller centre serving the 800 000 inhabitants of newly independent Timor Leste (formerly East Timor). Having ISO 9001:2000 certification will streamline the opening of new schools and clinics, as well as providing a benchmark for quality for these new operations.

### Conclusion

In summary, some of the benefits to CT were:

- further training in business and language skills;
- building the capacity of local staff to manage the organization;
- empowerment of the local staff to become engaged in the organizational decision-making process;

- greater accountability to external customers: donors and patients;
- development of customer focus and thus improved understanding of customer needs;
- better service to patients reduces human suffering, and
- improvement in donor confidence and funding.

The implementation of ISO 9001:2000 at CT has thus been an overwhelming success. It shows that ISO 9001:2000 can be equally effective for

NGO's as for more traditional for-profit, or governmental organizations. While NGO's face the same difficulties and challenges in achieving certification as other organizations, ISO 9001:2000 should not be seen as a "magic bullet", but rather as

a useful tool for overcoming some of the problems which NGO's face the world over. ■

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