Sithi

Posted by Sopheap Chak on Feb 05, 2010

Quick Look

Sithi is a Cambodian human rights portal that aims to crowdsourc and curate reports of human rights violations.

Founders: Sithi, Cambodian Center for Human Rights
Language: English
Beginning Date: February 1, 2009
Annual Budget 2009: $13120
Annual Budget 2010: $4080
Project Scale: National
Actor: Executive branch, Donors
Types of Tools: Visualize, Connect and engage
Specific Tools: Google Maps, OpenEvSys
Location: Cambodia

Context

Sithi, which means 'rights' in Khmer, has been in development over the past year and is expected officially launch in the coming months. This is the first Cambodian human rights portal that aims to create a single map-based database of reports of human rights violations with contributions from human rights activists, organizations, and regular citizens from across the country. Registered users can submit reports under a variety of sub-categories including judicial fairness, land tenure, and freedom of expression. The project was initiated by the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) with the aim of raising more awareness about human rights abuses through collaborative advocacy.

Sithi.org has so far been welcomed by some civil society organizations and government officials who remarked that the site will be helpful to highlight human rights violations which the government claims to take seriously. The site also aims to incorporate
relevant laws including the constitution, land law, and human rights conventions. They also hope to build a directory of NGOs, donor agencies, and media.

Only one web developer is currently working on the project, which has left the data missing though most of the functionality is in place. CCHR's director, Ou Virak, believes that the database will be gradually updating, especially if more organizations agree to contribute. Obstacles include a lack of internet penetration in Cambodia and building trust among all NGO partners. While in public beta the site has already received nearly 8,000 visitors. Virak hopes to increase that number several fold by making the site available in Khmer, Cambodia’s official language, and adding an interface for mobile phones.

Media

FAIL (the browser should render some flash content, not this).

Interview

What are the biggest obstacles to your success?:

With only one local staff member working on this project, it has been quite challenging to expand our objectives. The slow internet speed and high fees for internet access are two of our greatest challenges. The general public often cannot read or cannot access to internet. However, the most difficult obstacle has been building trust among NGOs to use the tool and to train them how to use it to benefit their project. There is sense of control and competition among NGOs and many are not willing to share their information publicly. It is challenging for us to convince them to share violated cases and join this collaborative effort with us.

How do you plan on overcoming those obstacles?:

We are trying to address these challenges slowly by continually updating the cases and engaging with our various NGO partners. By creating this web portal we can attract people/organizations who are willing to share their information and this will likely encourage others to also share their data. Also we are trying to look for different ways to raise funds so that we can hire necessary technical staff to improve the technical implementation. Regarding the high cost and slow speed of internet access in Cambodia, we expect that both will improve over time and that the younger generation especially will have much improved access. Our site's content will then become more and more important.

What problem is your project aiming to overcome?:

Sithi.org has built a human rights web portal to gather information from our organization and various partner organizations into a signal domain. Also we want to have more collaborative effort in putting together map of different violation and the general
situation of human rights.

**What are the roots of that problem?:**

Overall there are many human rights violations occurring throughout Cambodia. Also the lack of access to information contributes to the lack of actions for resolution. Thus Sithi.org is trying to establish a collaborative effort from all interested organizations and individuals who are working on promoting and protecting human rights in Cambodia.

**Why did you personally become involved in this project?:**

It is a project of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR), a non-political, independent, non-governmental organization based in Phnom Penh that works to promote and protect democracy and human rights throughout Cambodia. Sithi.org reflects many of the values and approaches of the CCHR: engaging in non-aggressive dialogue with all stakeholders; encouraging civil society organizations to take a more sophisticated and collaborative approach to bring about change; and exchanging knowledge in an innovative way to empower all those working on human rights in Cambodia.

**Are you providing unofficial channels of information that should be provided by the government?:**

No and yes. No, because the government is still obliged to provide all information to public and given the fact that there are several violated cases where the government fail or is not aware of. Thus yes, Sithi.org is intended to be a joint initiative developed by all those interested in and/or working on promoting and protecting human rights in Cambodia to contribute content to any section of the portal. Everyone can access this information.

**Why is the government not providing the information?:**

Though there is some information available by the government agencies, there are still certain pieces of information related to land concessions or development project, for example, which the government fails to provide to the public. It seems they want to keep it secret and do not want the public to have access to all the information.

**How does the information published on your website turn into offline change?:**

We want to create natural linkage between donors, international organizations, local organizations, researchers, grassroot activists on the ground, and those who are monitoring and documenting the cases. Once the cases and directory of relevant stakeholders are available online, people who want to learn more about the violated case on the map can directly contact them. By having all information online we hope to build a better bridge in a natural way.

We also want to map different key players in the human rights field by identifying cases of violations, and also different organizations, and community-based groups to spread awareness about the cases and advocate for resolution. This natural linkage will help coordination without relying on middlemen organizations.

**How many people work on your project?:**

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How many hours a week do you personally spend on the project?:
The web developer works eight hours a day, five day per week. So it should be 40 hours per week. This web portal is part of the Human Rights Database project which involves about six research teams to contribute the reports of human rights violations.

What are the most time consuming tasks?:
It takes a lot of effort to encourage other organizations to join us and contribute reports to the map. Also, finding the right tools and technologies with our limited budget is time-consuming.

How do you verify the identities of participants on your website?:
For now, all the data is entered by our organization. Much of the data provided has been collected as part of Cambodia Human Rights Database Project, which aims to enable widespread and sophisticated documentation and investigation of human rights violations in Cambodia.

In the future we want to allow other partner organizations to be able to enter their reports. Trusted civil society organizations and others are able to contribute content to any section of the portal. Everyone can access this information.

How do you attract new participants?:
There are a lot of things we need to work on. For example we need to make the site more accessible to the general public rather than making it too technical so that the majority of population cannot use it. We are looking for different ways to make this site more interesting and friendly to both the general public and human rights advocates. Also, we are working on making the site available in Khmer language.

What has been the most effective method of spreading awareness about your project?:
So far, our site has still not officially launched, however we are able to attract media attention. Our site has been promoted on our website, CCHR, and KI-Media. We also plan to have our site reach the general public via a mobile phone application and sticker announcements on tuk tuks (taxis) where the general public can become aware and participate in our project.

What are the incentives to participate in your project?:
On a single platform, advocates and the public can directly link to their cases and communities. They can utilize the tool to benefit their advocacy and project.

What skills and expertise would be of assistance to your project?:
Any feedback to improve this human rights web portal is welcomed. Also, we welcome experts in the field who know of online collaborative writing tools where we can produce a living report on human rights in Cambodia or even in the whole region of Southeast Asia. This can be done at sithi.org or by other initiatives.

How do you plan on financially sustaining your project?:
We are trying to look for different ways to raise funds and also looking for ways to keep the project cheap.
What other organizations are you working with?:

There are organizations who are willing to work with us and some do not given the sense of control and competition among NGOs. Still, we are hopeful to encourage more and more people to join in this project.

Have you thought about developing your own tools?:

We have been able to use google map for our web portal project and our database – Openevsys – has been developed by Human Rights Information and Documentation Systems International (HURIDOCS) and the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR).

Has there been any communication between your project and government officials?:

No, but we are trying to make sure the government will cooperate with us by both contributing and using this information. This will be a difficult task and will require much effort.

Notably, during an interview by Voice of America about the creation of the web portal, there was a positive remark from a government official who signaled that the site will be helpful to highlight the human rights violations which the government claims to be striving to improve.

Are there any legal obstacles to your work? Any laws that should be changed?:

Yes, there are some legal obstacles, including a lack of a freedom of information act and laws purportedly to stop the spread of misinformation which are then abused to restrict freedom of expression. We are also concerned about internet censorship which could hinder our site's development.

Have there been any attempts to replicate your work elsewhere?:

Yes, it seems that civil organizations are now looking for different online tools to maximize their project benefit and visibility including using youtube, facebook and other social networks. Also there are NGOs interested in our mapping web portal.

What other projects in your region should we know about?:

There is study in the Southeast Asia region, similar to the Global Voice's Transparency and Technology project, aiming to look for online tools to promote human rights in six countries.

If someone gave you $10,000 how would you use the money?:

With this money, we will be able to promote the collaborative effort; especially, to produce the collaborative report on human rights situation in Cambodia. CCHR will take a leadership in encouraging other organization to join with us. Also the younger generation will be our target to bring them in this project through training and encouraging them to contribute in the content.

If someone gave you $100,000 how would you use the money?:

We will expand our project into regional effort by having the collaborative report on human rights situation in Southeast Asia. Also,
through sithi.org, we will be able to expand our mapping to the regional violated cases, like the mapping of regional journalist being killed, for example.

**What are your plans for 2010 and 2011?:**

We want to have a living document on human rights situation in Cambodia through a collaborative effort where different NGOs can participate to submit their reports. This online report can be gradually updated and contributed by various NGOs with different specializations so that we can produce a comprehensive analysis of the human rights situation as it develops over time. This will be done in a similar fashion to Wikipedia and yet only credible NGOs are invited to contribute so that our report will be credible and cannot be hijacked by individuals with different agendas.

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**Comments**

by **Stephen M. Bauer** | February 11, 2010 - 20:23

**The Addition of Human Trafficking to the Violations Map**

The map is fantastic.

The the Human Rights category, I think you should add Human Trafficking.

In the Subcategories, I would add:

- Forced prostitution, including bonded
- Forced labor, including bonded labor
- Child prostitution
- Child labor
- enslavement/kidnapping/hostage-taking (as in abducting people for the purpose of trafficking)

If such categories and subsequent data were added, the map would get a great deal of attention from abolitionists world-wide. Through them it would also draw more attention to the other human rights violations in Cambodia.

In the above list, I included the word "bonded" because bonded labor violates ILO standards and is considered slavery. Many
do not understand that.

The issue of child prostitution is a multiple violation—kidnapping, enslavement, rape, prostitution, and child endangerment.

Very Interesting experience in Camboja!

This experience is very interesting and improve social control of many matters. I think it is necessary more transparency about human rights, because it is not correct work people who spent all their lives working and trying to get money to maintain their families are being abused, corrupted or any kind of disgrace that they can suffer. It is enough, world must change now, with all the other economical, financial, cultural, enviromental revolutions (?) currently happening.

I think it can be reproduce in several countries. For example in my country, Brazil. Of course developing countries are the target of experiences like that, but both developed countries must have a tool such that, mainly to improve several human rights not being proved in these countries or in wars, for example...

Useful Project

I spend some looking into the sithi.org web. Indeed a database of this scale will help many organization in Cambodia. The map based interface is also intuitive and will help concerned parties find information easily. Their plan of building a mobile interface and doing a Khmer version would surely get Sithi in front of more people.

I would urge the Sithi team to make contact with the Khmer blogosphere. The very little time I have been there, I have been amazed by the Khmer bloggers energy, organization skills and some of them are working in web development and design fields. I am sure they can help Sithi to reach more people via their blogs and also via social networks such as Facebook and twitter where they are very active. Sithi could demo the platform at the regular tech-gatherings that take place at organizations such as INSTEDD in Phnom Penh. This could attract volunteers willing to help out in the development or at the least point to easy to use and free technology tools.

I think the biggest challenge (as Ou Virak) mentions is getting other organizations to collaborate. Sithi developer could provide some way of attribution on the map, when let's say I hover over the case, it also shows me which organizations helped out in
the documentation. Hopefully when other NGOs find that Sithi can help them gain exposure to their own work, they will be more willing to work together.

Thank you Preetam Rai for your comment. There are two different challenges for this project:

1. Technical--we definitely need to make the site more user friendly and the tools to work. Your suggestion on the map is something we need to work on. Mr. Mesa who is the site developer is working on this and other technical matters. Linking up to the bloggersphere and other techies would be something we will try to do.

2. Content--this is the most challenging area. On the one hand, we will have to convince other organizations to join this initiatives. We will also need paid staffs to search for publicly available info or field search to put together comprehensive info on such things as "Community Organizations" or "Donors" or "Projects", etc. This is very time consuming and require good help.

idea for NGOs collaboration

One thing i impressed about Sithi is its function as a single web portal crowdsource and curate reports of human rights violations where it is hardly accessed from either the government or concerned NGOs.

If the collaborative effort is successful, it will be a great public source for research and advocacy for better human rights respect in Cambodia.

I have linked Sithi's team to the Cambodian blogosphere/barcamp which i hope some technical support or knowledge sharing can be achieved as advised by Preetam.

Concerning the effort for having all NGOs collaborated in this project, my suggestions:

1. Since many Cambodian NGOs have common donors, CCHR can approach donors to have a strategic fund where all NGOs will need to link/cooperate each other on the human rights report/violated cases.

2. Sithi need to be persistent in connecting with interested NGOs partners by showing the benefit of this web portal for
their individual projects as well as the human rights advocacy as a whole. In addition, Sithi need to show that the sources which will be published will be credited to their organization.

3. With the plan to official launch of this web portal in coming months, Sithi team can now approach other NGOs to have them join. In this period, I believe NGOs is more willing to cooperate as they expect for more public credit.