



# INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

*An initiative of  
the National Academy of Public Administration,  
and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs  
and the Bobst Center for Peace and Justice,  
Princeton University*

---

Oral History Program

Series:

Government Traps

Interview no.:

K9

---

Interviewee: Sok Siphana

Interviewer: Rohan Mukherjee

Date of Interview: 29 October 2009

Location: Phnom Penh  
Cambodia

---

Innovations for Successful Societies, Bobst Center for Peace and Justice  
Princeton University, 83 Prospect Avenue, Princeton, New Jersey, 08544, USA  
[www.princeton.edu/successfulsocieties](http://www.princeton.edu/successfulsocieties)

MUKHERJEE: It is the 29<sup>th</sup> of October. I am Rohan Mukherjee. I am with His Excellency Sok Siphana who is the Advisor to the Royal Government of Cambodia. Mr. Siphana if I could ask you to start off by providing an introduction of yourself for the benefit of those listening to this interview.

SIPHANA: *How far back?*

MUKHERJEE: As far back as you think is important.

SIPHANA: *Quickly, after the Khmer Rouge regime, I ran away to America as a refugee. So in the '80s I resettled in the United States as a refugee. I got my law degree there. After the Paris Peace Accord in 1993, I came back to get married and since then I never left the country. I took up an assignment with the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) as a legal advisor. Then later on I was offered in 1999 a position as Vice Minister of Commerce. During that time I did six years with the government of Cambodia where I was primarily in charge of WTO (World Trade Organization) accession, trade policy, commercial law—that sort of thing.*

*After Cambodia's accession to the WTO, I resigned from the government and decided to take a position as Director of Technical Cooperation with the International Trade Center, which is a joint technical agency of the World Trade Organization and UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development). So I did that over three years and a few months ago I decided that my heart is for home, for Cambodia, so I left the UN and WTO family to come back and serve my country. I have been back about three months now and upon my return the Prime Minister decided to appoint me as Advisor to the Royal Government with ministerial rank.*

*So basically, I'm just restarting life in Cambodia.*

MUKHERJEE: But you have six years of very valuable experience in the government in which you worked strenuously to help Cambodia accede to the WTO which happened in 2004. So it would be very interesting if you could talk to me a little bit about the period when you entered office in 1999. What were the challenges that you perceived in terms of reform in general and the WTO accession in particular?

SIPHANA: *When I was asked to join in 1999—when I received a phone call from the Minister of Commerce to say we'd like you to come and join the government, I said, "doing what?" He said, "Become my deputy." I said, "Yes, but I'm not a politician, I'm just a lawyer." He said, "Look, the country is about to enter ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). We are in the process of negotiating the WTO accession. We need new blood. You would be helpful with your background as a lawyer working for international organizations. You can come and help the country."*

*So I decided—in fact, it was my wife who decided, who said that this is an opportunity for us to do something for the country. I said but it is going to be a big drop of salary. She said, it's okay, she'll take another job, okay? So it was with this nationalistic passion that I decided to join. At that time I was quite fresh, I never worked in politics. But as a professional, as a lawyer, with the UNDP and a legal advisor attached to the Minister of Economy and Finance at that time (who is now the Deputy Prime Minister of Economy and Finance), I was pretty much working on a lot of issues of rebuilding the country—but more from the redevelopment side, reconstruction, the policy, the legal framework.*

*I found in those days we had so many things that we needed to do. This ministry has to do this, this ministry has to do that and resources were so little. It's not like everybody had the budget to do fifteen things we needed to do now or at our own pace. Here it was a matter of prioritizing. Which one is important with the meager resources that we had? I found in those days for the first time that WTO probably could be that overarching objective that could unify the country for one goal: how do we regain our legitimacy, international legitimacy, bearing in mind that we went through seventeen years of economic embargo.*

*The Cambodian people knew the taste of isolation. So it is not like we have been twisting arms to liberalize. In our heart we want to open up. In those days I found that this could be it: from the desire to obtain international legitimacy, from the desire to enter the community of trading nations, to the adoption of rules, which is fascinating for me, because when I look at the WTO, it is a rule-based. The WTO covers pretty much anything that is happening in the country. Whether people realize that or not is something else.*

*Whether the Minister of Telecommunications realizes that "Wait a minute, why the [expletive deleted] am I subject to WTO, I'm in the Ministry of Telecommunications?" To the Minister of Agriculture who might say: "Wait a minute. I'm producing rice. What the [expletive deleted] do I have to do with the World Trade Organization?" To me, the WTO with its rule-base—though even in those days I was not really into the detailed rules—I said, "Hey, this is one organization that has a lot of tentacles in different parts of the economic sector. This could be it." Then when I looked at the country's agenda—when I looked at the development plan, the strategy—I said we want something like that.*

*We want to open up. We want to do trade. We want to reduce poverty by creating more economic opportunity. But, at the same time we have the challenge that we're a small country. We don't have the big market like Vietnam or Thailand, so we need predictability of market access. We don't want to be at the mercy of the American who for political reasons may want some day to shut us out. Or we don't want to be at the mercy of the European, or the Japanese, or the Chinese because we're a small country. So that was the motivating drive. When I was asked to take on the work of the WTO negotiations—in those days it was perceived as very much an undesirable job because it was not lucrative. It is better to work on export licenses or issuing licenses for garment factories—I felt that this is it, and from then on we never looked back. We became the fastest country to join the WTO since the WTO came to be.*

MUKHERJEE: When was it exactly that the decision was made by the government that WTO accession was important and who made that decision?

SIPHANA: *I think when I joined in 1999; it was still in the early phase. But it took one solid year of a lot of awareness building, of pushing the agenda, of explaining to civil society, of explaining to the private sector, of explaining to our own colleagues in the ministry, why WTO accession is important for our country, why we need to enter. So it was more a matter of convincing our own people, rather than convincing the Americans, the Japanese that we wanted to enter.*

*When the people—particularly the civil society as a whole—realized that this was an opportunity and I felt that it was probably this awareness campaign that put Cambodia into the front line. Why when Cambodia's ratification package went to the parliament, there were 121 votes out of 122 and that one vote was of one parliamentarian who went to the bathroom. He was so annoyed when journalists*

---

*asked him but why you're not voting, he said, "Look, had I not gone to the bathroom, I would vote also." So we made a joke to say it was 121, plus one guy in the bathroom. But, in fact, it was unanimous, even the opposition supported this drive. Entering the WTO was a national objective for the country.*

MUKHERJEE: But initially you did have to convince a lot of people.

SIPHANA: A lot.

MUKHERJEE: And who exactly were the main stakeholders that you perceived?

SIPHANA: *I think in those days there were a lot of sectoral ministries who had their own mandate, who felt that it's my mandate, it's my telecom, it's my agriculture, it's my tourism, it's my architecture, it's my bar association, it's my stuff, don't mess around with me, let me do my thing. But then for me it was, it may be yours, at your level, but as an aggregate it's a national thing. As a national thing there will be winners, there will be losers. Not everybody, not every sector, not every ministry, not every agency will win or will gain. Some will have to suffer. But if you do a plus and minus sheet you will find that nationally we will emerge as a winner.*

*In those days it took a lot of convincing and give and take to say that if the Ministry of Finance cares about revenue, because we need revenue to pay the salary of civil servants, where should we tax? Where should we impose a higher duty of import? But, if, on the other hand, across the town, you have the Ministry of Education, which has as its goal to give Cambodia's younger generation access to more computers, more printers, it is a matter of playing with the tariff, right?*

*So if we want to see five-ten years down the road a Cambodian young society more computer literate, we must be able to lower the tariff on IT equipment so that they could pay only \$600 for a 10% tariff duty versus \$1200 for a 120% tariff duty. The difference between a father, a group of fathers who have 1200 bucks and 600 bucks is huge. So here is an opportunity cost. Maybe finance will have to look at luxury cars to tax for its revenue. But we should give a break to the education sector.*

*So it took a lot of lobbying to say: "At the end it is for the betterment of our society. You may have to take a cut on your side." Convincing the Bar Association to open up practice to foreign lawyers so that we can be more exposed to foreign best practices—exposure to the Baker and McKinseys of the world, the best consultancies of the world—versus being very shut down, and then not knowing what is happening. We tried to tell them, look: "In the accounting sector we have the big four. There's Ernst and Young here, PricewaterhouseCoopers there, but five years later look, we have a lot of young Cambodians who are now opening their own accounting practice because the guy, those girls, have been slaving for the last four years working as an accountant for Pricewaterhouse. Now she feels that she knows enough that she can start her own little accounting practice versus the Bar Association which is claustrophobic and says, it's my private club, I won't allow the foreigner to come."*

*But I said, for the last five years: "If a Singaporean investor comes to sign a \$30 million lease hotel, our biggest landmark, do you honestly think that if you don't have experience, Norton Rose, the Singaporean lawyer, will give you the legal contract? No. You may have a translation contract, but you will not have the legal contract, attorney contract, because you're not in a position to give comfort to an*

---

*investor who is going to put \$30 million when you don't have an international practice."*

*So there had to be a lot of explanation. I think it is not that the Cambodians in those days were against opening up, but it was more how to explain to them to remove the uncertainty of the future. That's probably it. It was giving comfort: "Look man, it's not as bad at the end when you overcome that hump. It is better. Of course, it's not a walk in the park, but there is always a price to pay. Are we willing to pay the price now or are we going to suffer later? I think at the end of the day the WTO gives us that possibility to really harness a national drive. It becomes an overarching strategy for the country." Now you talk to any parliamentarian, to any private sector leader and WTO is part of their language.*

*When I traveled to different countries during the Geneva days—when I went to many different countries during accession negotiations—I found that the missing link in many countries was that society did not understand what the objectives of the government were. They felt: "Well, the government is negotiating. Have we been consulted? Well, we heard it's good for us, but that's about it."*

MUKHERJEE: So what specific activities did you take to convince social groups or business groups?

SIPHANA: *We had a lot of pressure from the Oxfams of the world, the civil society, and the do-gooders, who unfortunately in those days had more qualms about the global trading system than about Cambodia. But because Cambodia is the first country that may enter WTO, it's a good case to illustrate. I had to tell Oxfam: "Look, I'm not saying my trade strategy is the best, but in life there's no perfect information, perfect timing, perfect negotiation. We do with what we have with the time that we have, with the issue that we have, and we work it out."*

*So in this case we had to be very straight with civil society and ask: "If you were us, what would you do?" And I would say: "It's very easy to make a girl pregnant, but it's very different to be a responsible father. It's one thing to come at the conference and drop fifteen questions which you have no answer for yourself anyway, and then have a coffee break and leave for the next two days wondering, gee, how would we answer that? We don't have any answer. We're emerging from a war, we're poor, we've been in isolation for seventeen years, most of our intellectuals are dead. But we need to create jobs, we need to have access to the US market. We don't want to be at the mercy of the Europeans. We've got to do something. We need to have a rule-based system. Bilateral negotiation with the US will not go far. Bilateral negotiation with the Thai will not go far. We need a rule-base where we can have a voice. We may be small but the rules apply to the small guy and to the big guy. If someday we have to take a big country on in an anti-dumping case, there's only one rule. We will need to pay a good lawyer to defend us, but there's only one rule (in WTO), not subject to lobby."*

*So these are the sorts of things we did. How do you get civil society to understand our situation? Not that we don't care about the country. I've been pretty much labeled on both sides of the fence. Half label me as a hero, national hero. The parliament announcing in the parliament setting that I'm a national hero. Some NGOs call me a traitor, a sell out. Some other NGOs think that it is probably the best thing I ever did.*

*But look, I'm not here to please anybody. I just felt that with what we have, this is the best opportunity, the best tool, the best instrument for this moment in time.*

---

*Later on we built a lot of partnerships with the Oxfams of the world, with the NGOs of the world. I say: "Look, you have a role to play. It's not by harassing us that you're going to get any improvement. If you think that you're very good in capacity building for the organic farmer at the grassroots level be my guest, work with them, I'll support you. Because we're not in a position to work with the grassroots. We don't have the resources. But if you can, you should bring agriculture. If you think that our agriculture policy is not good, well help out. Help, make us a case, help us train. Because later on I can get the private sector to train. But it's not the private sector's job to be the philanthropist, not when you're still medium sized. Of course if you're Rockefeller you can throw us some money, but Cambodia, we're not Rockefeller. So let's have less harsh talk." At the end we founded a partnership with them. We found a compromise and we work together. Everybody has their own little sun.*

MUKHERJEE: And what were the different strategies that you employed to reach NGOs like Oxfam and then to reach the public and then to reach the government? Did you have—what were the specific tools that you used? Were they workshops, seminars, public information campaigns? What did you rely on?

SIPHANA: *I think every case is unique. It's flexibility; it's open-mindedness, humbleness, if I can use the word. Because bear in mind, I'm quite young in the system, right? In the political system I'm quite young. In those days I was much younger than now. Now I'm about to be 50. But in those days I was still quite young. To have respect—you're from India, we share the same cultural trait—age is not in our favor when we push on policy issues. So you have to be quite humble. You have to be invited. You have to be accepted.*

*I find that humbleness is probably one trait that saved me a lot. It is to be able to say: "Look brother, I will not say certain things on a microphone in a conference setting. Let's have a nice coffee. But these are the issues brother. With your ministry these are the issues. These are certain things you have to tackle. Of course, you know, if you do certain things, take certain policy action, you're not out in the cold. There are a lot of good, hard agencies, a lot of good development partners who can help us. If technical assistance is your problem, we can get technical assistance. But you need to decide. At the end of the day you have to look at the long-term horizon."*

*Rebuilding a country is not a quick fix and it is not popular when you do reform because you affect some people adversely. You attack entrenched interests. But you have to be able to tackle the entrenched interests and to say: "Look guys, if we go along, we will do better." I'll give you a good example.*

*After the peace process we had this practice— not even a law, it is not even a regulation, it is a practice—that if foreign business traders come, they can only hold 49% interest in a trading company, 51% has to be Cambodian. Ten years later, the practice continues. Who would want to change the practice? It suits us fine. Hey, to have 51% control of just having Cambodian nationality, it's a good deal. I wouldn't change it right?*

*But then we find that, as the economy grows, we want more sophisticated, larger traders to come. But we have difficulty attracting credible companies. When we started negotiating we were asked why this practice? Then we started digging. We couldn't find any trace of a piece of paper requiring that 51%, so we decided to change. Again a lot of private sector members in the Chamber of Commerce started accusing us. They said, "Oh, you're not nationalistic, you don't care for us."*

*I say: "Look brother, the practice has been going for ten years. If the practice in ten years didn't work, what makes you think that in one more year it will work? In ten years what you see is not good. If you were them would you give 51% of your assets to somebody just because you want to trade in that country? No. Fish will swim to cooler water. Investors are the same. Cambodia is not the paradise of the investment world. So some board of directors will never approve giving up 51% to invest in Cambodia, trade in Cambodia. Some corporate directors may be sued by their shareholders because they think it was lack of due diligence. So they go to other places. That's why we can't get good companies to come. If your aim is to have a partnership, and if you have 51% of zero, how much do you have? So change your paradigm. Allow companies to come. Don't be obsessed with this shareholding thing. Shift to become a partner. Shift to become a supplier. Then guess what? You're going to rent him his house. He's going to hire a driver. He is going to buy a car. He's not going to bring fifty trucks. You're going to be his transporter, right? And [expletive deleted], you're going to make more money being his supplier than being his partner. You're going to sell him his land. You're going to rent him his land. What's the big deal, being a 51% shareholder, or being his biggest supplier? I'll take the biggest supplier." They say, "Ah okay." So it is pushing the paradigm. At the end they're happy. But in those days it was seen as, "Oh my God, you don't care for us."*

*We have 600 lawyers now. In those days I was the first Secretary General of the Bar. It was the first time in the history of the country that we had a Bar Association. I was asked to be a volunteer to help the Bar. I was pushing to open the Bar, the legal practice. Now there are a lot of young Cambodians who have started their own legal practice. They partner with foreign lawyers. They can take on international legal work, and I'm proud. When we started we had 47 lawyers.*

*Now when I go places they come up to me, "Oh teacher." I say, "How are you doing? They say, "I'm doing good. Business is good. Look at my big car. I have a big house." I'm proud. It's something when you drink your coffee in Geneva, you smile, and you say hmm, this is the effect. I'm proud." Of course, I can never say WTO accession was all my doing. But I'm saying that to be the catalyst of that, I think is something to be happy about.*

MUKHERJEE: It seems that in the initial stages no one was happy with you.

SIPHANA: Yes.

MUKHERJEE: The NGOs, the private sector, the government. So where did you find your allies? How did you build support to back you up because you were just one man?

SIPHANA: *One guy at a time, one minister at a time. One sector at a time. One company at a time. I drank a lot of coffee a day then; a lot of noodle soup in the morning; a lot of late lunches. It really takes time to convince one person at a time.*

*One day I went to a cabinet meeting. One minister turned to me. He was sick and tired of every time he saw a letter from the Ministry of Commerce inviting him to come to the ministry for another meeting, for another workshop, for another think tank meeting. So he scribbled on this paper he passed to me: "Give me ten reasons why we should enter WTO." Of course I was polite, just smiled. Half an hour later, I just wrote back on a small piece of paper, "If we can save 300,000 jobs, if we can save the government industry from collapsing, I do not need to give you the other nine reasons. I gave it to him. He looked back. He gave me a*

---

*smile. He grinned. Okay. For one minister it is one preoccupation. To the other minister it's another preoccupation.*

*The other case is interesting. He used to be the Minister of Tourism. We have a big task force. The Prime Minister has felt that to really succeed we must have access to all the ministries in one place. So the Prime Minister has created a task force. The Minister of Commerce was the chair. I was the vice-chair, but I was more the operational guy. Then we have over 120 something policy makers in different ministries at the vice-minister level. So it meant that I had access to anybody in different ministries, in government, at any time on an equal basis. Here we have to meet, we have to argue, we have to discuss. Everyone that comes must be mandated to decide because we don't have time to waste. If you just come to take notes and go back to ask the minister, then don't come. But when you come you're mandated to decide.*

*Then one day the Minister of Tourism got a little bit of scolding from the Prime Minister on a regulation relating to hotel classification. Why was it a little bit slow? The Minister of Tourism at the time was quite mad. Then a few days later I bumped into him in a coffee shop, and I said, "Brother, can I sit down?" He said, "Yes, yes, please sit down." He said, "I'm so sick and tired of this WTO. You know we're a sovereign country. Why the [expletive deleted] is America pushing us to rush this hotel classification thing? We'll do it when we're ready."*

*I said, "Brother, can I order my iced coffee?" He said, "Okay, okay." I said, "Brother, number one, it is not the Americans. You are the Minister of Tourism. You know, the biggest hotel deal that you brought for Cambodia, Raffles Singapore, came and signed the biggest contract to renovate two of the oldest hotels in the country, and many others are coming because of you. You brought the big shot. But brother, you're one man. You may have a wise minister who may go on the same trip, but you see they come because they trust you. But how many Raffles will come to Cambodia? How many of you can meet the Raffles of the world to convince them, the Le Meridiens, the big shots? You can't. It's not personality-based. You, as Minister of Tourism, need to invite companies to invest in Cambodia. But you are not in a position to offer personal guarantees. No, they need assurance that if they invest in a five-star hotel, these are the incentives that they will get from the Ministry of Finance. If it is a three-star hotel, these are the master lists that they will get for custom duty rebates or whatever. But if they are at the mercy of a civil servant who says, "Well, I had a bad night last night. In fact, you know what, you think it's a five-star? No. It's a three-star and that's it sir. Or four-star if you're nice to me." So in other words, forget the American, the [expletive deleted] with the Americans. You do this for your own self, for the success of your policy. And, of course, when you pass the law, the Americans are happy anyway, and I can negotiate a better deal with the Americans. But you don't do it for the Americans, okay brother?"*

*"And by the way, having said that, the guy that you appointed to the task force doesn't show up regularly. In fact, you should kick his ass, because he's not up to speed with what is happening. He doesn't report back to you, so you are not up to speed with what is happening. When you're asked by the Prime Minister you don't know what's happening. That's why you get scolded."*

*So at the end he said, "You want noodle soup?" I said, "I want a lobster meal brother." But you see, it is hard to say which way, which technique. But it is one issue at a time, one personality at a time. It takes a lot of time.*

---

MUKHERJEE: Did you enjoy the support of the Prime Minister, and did he make it clear to everyone that—?

SIPHANA: *Oh my God, if it not been for the Prime Minister, we would never have made it. The PM made it as his top agenda. And it is clear. He delegated full authority to me. When I travel to negotiate, he delegates full authority to me and that is a big trust. Normally I don't smoke. I stopped smoking. But during the negotiations in Geneva we smoked a bit because it sort of relieved the stress. My other colleague, he is now the Secretary-General of the CDC, the Council for the Development of Cambodia, his Excellency Sok Chenda. We have the same last name.*

*I asked him, I said, "Brother, you know, I really don't know who will wait for us at the airport when we go back. We'll be labeled as traitors. Will they arrest us at the airport, or will it be a beautiful girl coming with flower garlands to welcome us?" It was very stressful. It was not easy not knowing what will be the reaction. I will never forget what he said. He said, "Brother, when we come to Geneva, we're only ten or twelve people. But, you know, we are in fact not negotiating for the Cambodian government. We're not negotiating for our boss, for the Prime Minister. We are negotiating for the twelve million Cambodian people who do not have a voice. If we think, in all our humility, with the little knowledge that we have, that we have the best situation and the best decision and unanimously vote that it is the right thing to do and we're not outside the mandate that we were given by the Council of Ministers, we should do it." To me that probably is the best gauge. Our mandate was to do whatever is best for our country.*

*In fact, we caused a lot of unhappiness at the end of our negotiations in some agencies because we did receive a lot of advice, but toward the latter six months or so, we stopped listening too much to technical advice. We offended some of our old friends. We asked them to be understanding. We said that we appreciate the support that they gave to us. They cared. They wanted to help Cambodia and everything. Not that we were discarding their advice, but we felt that we had come to a moment of policy decision. This was our moment now—not any more a technical decision, but a policy decision. So we asked that they give us the policy space. We asked that they give us a break. We asked that they let us decide.*

*Some people took it magnanimously. Some people took offense. But at the end we thanked them and said that we are the policy makers; we will decide. We had to be able to stand in front of our Parliament—the people elected by our people. We had to live with that and I wanted to sleep well at night. So I think it was not an easy moment. I think you have to live with your conscience. I can tell you this. I sleep well at night.*

MUKHERJEE: So you spoke a lot about changing attitudes of various people who either didn't understand how important WTO was, or who were not willing to understand. But you also mentioned entrenched interests.

SIPHANA: Yes.

MUKHERJEE: That's a whole different kind of opposition because there there are clear incentives despite attitudes to oppose reforms. So could you talk a little bit about what kind of entrenched interests you came up against?

SIPHANA: *Entrenched interests, in the case of Cambodia, is a little bit unique because historically it is very difficult to compare to other countries that went through a*

---

*normal economic evolution. For us it is a revolution that cost three million Cambodian lives, mostly intellectual people. So we restarted from scratch, isolation.*

*I happened to be move in after the Khmer Rouge lost. We found the first house, we moved in there. We lived as squatters and then, years later, the house was ours because the state started recognizing private property ownership. A lot of economic activity is like that. There was no ill will. There was no malicious intent. Then suddenly when the market economy principle was adopted, when the UN came, new principles started to apply. There was new a new base of economic rules. The Ministry of Finance started to put in place different regulatory regimes, prudential regimes. So more regulation in the economy, more openness, transparency, competition, that sort of thing. So do I condemn those who have plentiful assets? I don't. Because I could be one of them had I been in the right place, at the right moment, at the right time with the right people.*

*So jealousy aside, I find that it's like Russia. You happen to be oligarch because you happened to be there when the privatization took place. Having said that, how do I convince them that opening up the country, liberalizing the economy, going for more competition, would be beneficial for the country as a whole? Because I believe that street-smart economic development, or spontaneous economic development has a limit. At one point, opportunity will apply to us. Then you have to enter into an economic space where competition has to be by the rules.*

*Entering the WTO is such a metaphor that you have a rule-base where you have to compete, some more unfairly than others, some more hypocritically than others, but at least on paper we have to deal with it, right? So I say that competition has to start at home. If we want some day to enter the global, or at least the regional competition, we must start building competition at home.*

*I do karate. I'm a fourth degree black belt karate. I've been doing karate since childhood, on and off, but for the last fifteen straight years I've been doing karate three times a week. I know the value of competition. If you want to win a competition, a fight, there's no shortcut. You cannot buy the jury; you cannot buy the teacher. You have to go through a rigorous practice. It takes a lot of time. Practice on your own. Practice with other people—mindset, meditation, and reading about the philosophy. But when you get in that ring in that ten minutes, you don't need anything else because you're secure.*

*How do you get these guys to understand that? When the day comes that you have to compete, you cannot reach for the book then. You've got to start this competition now. Readiness starts today. Right now, you're the lucky guy because you happen to be the lucky guy. The day will come when luck will not take you far. You will need a good accountant. You will need a good lawyer. You will need a good manager. You will need a good staff. That's the only way you're going to compete with the Thai businessman, with the Vietnamese businessman, with the Indian businessman. If you're going to break into the rice market to sell to Europe you've got to have guys who are capable.*

*It was very difficult in the early days to convince people why they had to take this step. But now they're doing well. In a way it is not that they're all doing it all at the same time, but they have started to see that by the month, by the year, more and more sophisticated players are entering the market. Now they have to start reaching out to people who are more educated, staff more experienced. Now they have to start being more involved in government policy, now they have to*

---

*take the time to voice their concerns in the public/private sector forum for example.*

*That is not something that I'd seen ten years ago. Ultimately I think it is all about trying to tell them a little bit what would happen if you don't do it, rather than if you do it. It is like the consequence of not going to school. I always tell my kids, "Sure you don't have to go to school. I'm not forcing you. You don't have to wake up at 6:30, but think of the consequences if you're not going to school. You'll be plowing the rice field. Do you want to be a farmer plowing the rice field? Well then you'd better get up." So it is hard to say which way, which approach, is best. I have to pick one person; I have to understand what ticks for that person. That is why for me, since I came back, if you ask me for my business card, I don't have one. It never occurred to me that I needed a business card.*

*I can reach out to people in this society. Why? Because in the WTO days—the six years of pushing WTO—I had the opportunity to meet so many people, to understand every one of them pretty much on a personal basis. This minister, what is driving him, what would piss him off, what would motivate him? This businessman, how did he get rich? It just boils down to a large psychoanalytic program. How do you find the sensitive point that will make him change? I think there is no general solution. That's why, when I go to Laos, I go to Sudan, Ethiopia, to share my experience, I scratch my head because I don't know what to say. I say it's hard. It's hard to say that this approach works in your country. It worked in my country, but it is more because of me. It is more because there is this passion that I believe that it is the right thing to do. I believe that in the context of my country, in that spectrum of time in this historical distortion that we are going through, this time warp, there is an opportunity. But Sudan is different, Laos is different. Dealing with a minister in another country is different because his motivating factor may be different.*

*I went to Ethiopia. I spent nearly two hours with the senior economist who is in charge of WTO accession. Ethiopia received a lot of help from USAID (United States Agency for International Development) because they're a big ally. So they've been helping a lot of technical work to help prepare WTO accession. But I was told by one person there to say that it is very difficult to move the Ethiopians, they are not—they sit on it. So when I went there I spent about two hours talking, not as somebody from the UN, but more as Sok Siphana, the guy with the Cambodian experience.*

*I told them look, "I'm not saying my approach would work in your country, but I'm just telling you what motivates me. Maybe for you it's a different motivation; maybe for your government, a different motivation. But ultimately you must find your own motivation." I told the vice-minister of Laos. "Until you are ready to stand in front of parliament to get your head chopped off, end your career and be fired—until you reach that point, don't do it. If you can say, "I can take it," then do it. At one point I almost submitted my resignation to my minister because he was second-guessing our team, our negotiating team.*

*We came back from Geneva, got off the plane 10 o'clock at night. The phone rings. He says, "Look, I understand you've been negotiating on this point and I think that's an error in judgment. I'd like you to prepare a letter for me to sign to send to that minister and we'd like to renegotiate." So I say, "Yes brother." I look at the clock, it is about 10 o'clock, that would be 4 o'clock Geneva time. So I'm suspecting who is calling from Geneva: some unhappy people. I say, "Okay, yes, brother, you'll get the letter tomorrow. But you get two letters. One letter is for that minister, for Cambodia to renegotiate. The second letter is my resignation*

---

*letter because: number one, we as a team have fully delegated authority. You were not there, we were there. We unanimously agreed that that is the line that we should go for. We felt that it was still within the mandate, what the councilmen gave to us. What we decide is best for the country. But if you do not feel that is the case then I resign.” Then I copy to the team and the team concurs.*

*A week later he said yes, okay, we jumped the gun and that’s it. But this is the sort of pressure. You must have principles. If you don’t have principles—if you’re weak—that’s it. To me, my principle in those days was that my Prime Minister was clear on where he wanted to take the country. Number two, he gave full blessing, full support. Number three, we as the negotiators have a conscience. We are a small team, but we don’t have the money to take twenty people every trip. So we have to do best with what we have. For me I’m clear. I’m doing it for my country. To me, if I have to leave, I leave. If I’m fired, so be it. But, of course, the minister came to reason and we buried the hatchet.*

MUKHERJEE: You mentioned earlier, you alluded to this, that WTO was an objective as much as an instrument, for getting a lot of different parts of government to do certain things that would be counted as reform.

SIPHANA: Yes.

MUKHERJEE: Could you talk a little bit about how you used that, if there were any reforms that you pushed using the carrot of WTO?

SIPHANA: *One of the biggest things, maybe from a very idiosyncratic way: I’m a lawyer, so I always believe that without regulatory regime to back us up, you cannot implement good policy. I like legal drafting, I like to defend law and parliament, but aside from this personal liking, I felt that at the end of the day if we are to instill the confidence of the foreign direct investors, we cannot give them assurance verbally, we must give them a legal framework. We must give them a certain predictability. We must give them that law that matters, that convention that matters, the New York Convention on the Recognition and Enforcement of Foreign Arbitral Awards, for example. We must ratify, accept the convention, things that investors would want. How do you put yourself in the shoes of that guy who wants to invest 10 million in your country? It’s not because he likes Cambodia. Of course there is a certain liking, but at the end of the day the guy has to be accountable to his shareholders.*

*That’s why I say that putting the legal system in place is the most fundamental pillar. The rest, improving the service sector is cosmetic; improving efficiency is cosmetic. They come later. Working on industrial parks is next. It is easier to convince investor to put the money in the EPZ (Export Processing Zone). But you must have a good commercial code. You must have good company law. You must have good intellectual property protection. You must have good custom laws so that they know there is predictability—when they can enter, when they can leave, whatever.*

*That is why establishing a national legislative regulatory agenda was at the top of my agenda. So we came up with a tentative list and from there, I pushed. I said, “This is what we think; these are the laws we need to put in place.” From there it caught on and had a life of its own. At one point the councilmen said, “Adopt it.” The parliament adopted it, and it became a sort of road map. From there the development agencies like the World Bank, the ADB (Asian Development Bank), UNDP, wanted to support legislation. They look at the agenda and said, “Ah, okay, we’d like to support the law on secure transactions; we’d like to support the*

---

*law on bankruptcy.” I think it made life easier for these missions to go back to their headquarters and say “Cambodia has a roadmap already. It is defined already. If we want to push for this programming loan, for this technical assistance, they know what they want already.” So that’s how I used both sides of the fence. On one side I got the government to prioritize, because you see time is of the essence, because working on economic law would be to the detriment of social law; it would be to the detriment of a social security law or a family law, or women against violence law or something like that.*

*But we said, “Look, at least we know that for the next several years these are the laws that we need to put in place. Of course, with law we must have policies right?” So when we met we requested that we have in place a trademark—a patent—law because we’re required to comply with the Treaty on Intellectual Property [TRIP]. Having said that, what would be our intellectual property policy? It forced us to start looking at policy. You know like the dog wagging the tail, the tail wagging the dog. Law is not the dog; law is the tail. Policy is the dog. It is not the legal drafter who is going to dictate the policy to the policy maker, it is the opposite. The policy maker decides, and then the legal drafter drafts.*

*So that is how I used the WTO as a means to achieve the end. The framework for predictability, transparency. From there, rule-based.*

MUKHERJEE: How much of that roadmap has been achieved since you left?

SIPHANA: *I must say that we have come a long way. From the legislative agenda we passed more than half of the laws. Of course, within the WTO they recognize that there are some things that are beyond their control: the other branch of the state, which is the legislative branch. Because laws are always delayed, right? Just because the government pushes a bill for parliament to adopt, there is always a time lag. We’re behind one year; we’re behind six months—some laws maybe two years. But as a whole, if I look at the lists of laws that we have, right now I must say that more than 50% we have enacted. And give or take a couple of more years, most of the laws that we’re supposed to be putting in place will be there. Then we have to think about implementation.*

MUKHERJEE: So in negotiating for Cambodia at the WTO you mentioned that there were many ministries whose interests had to be accommodated. So representation was clearly important in your agenda. But at the same time sometimes people argue that if you’re too representative, you’re not that effective.

SIPHANA: Yes.

MUKHERJEE: So did you find yourself balancing that concern in sort of developing your stance?

SIPHANA: *Yes, clearly, too many chefs in the kitchen you burn the cake, right? But there has to be a strong balancing act between sincere dialog and lip service. I think in the case of this government, the private sector is very strong. Civil society is more than strong. Opposition more than strong. So it is not like they’re going to sit still. They’re very proactive. At the end, this proactive participation from different parties is very dynamic.*

*Right now in terms of public/private sector consultation, they’re very organized. The government and private sector are meeting on a regular basis. They have working groups on different topics—on agriculture, on energy, on transport, on regulation. They have people appointed. The private sector appoints themselves to be the counterpart of the government. I’m telling you, if you think coordinating*

---

*the government is difficult, try coordinating company executives. They say hey, look, I'm Coca-Cola Cambodia, you are Pepsi-Cola Cambodia, why the [expletive deleted] do I have to listen to you. I'm one telephone operator here. You're the executive of the other telephone operator here. What the [expletive deleted], we're competitors so why should you represent the interests of this group? It's very difficult.*

*But at the end the government forced them to say, "Look, guys get organized. We don't want to see you one at a time. Get your act together." With the donors we do the same thing. They're squabbling. Four years in Geneva, I know. They're all positioning for funding. You think ADB cares about World Bank? World Bank cares about UNDP? UNDP cares about the IMF? They don't. Getting these guys coordinated is like putting a crab in the basket. But you see this government here, they're tough, particularly the Deputy Prime Minister. He says, "Look, don't bring your squabbles to the table. Get organized. When you come to me on a regular basis—whether it is every month or three months—come with a unified voice." Because the government has strong ownership on this, these guys are now organized. If you go to see the World Bank, if you go to see ADB, you will hear that that they are organized. They discuss among themselves. They thrash out the issues. When they see the government, they have somebody representing them, but they don't try to fight for the microphone. In the early years it was not like that.*

MUKHERJEE: In the course of six years that you worked on the WTO accession, were there any unforeseen obstacles that you came across that you hadn't planned for? How did you deal with those?

SIPHANA: *"Unforeseen" was almost like a monthly happening. Because you see in those days, let's face it, we were a bit naïve. We were a bit innocent. We'd been ignored also. I can't say that we knew the WTO. We were learning by doing. All of us were struggling to understand them. We went around the guards and everything. Reading WTO rules was like a sleeping pill—after fifteen pages you fall asleep. There was always some demand, always some unexpected request. Always some ambassador wanted to see us. It was always some unhappy minister. It was always some NGO who you read the newspaper the next day is trashing us. It was always something.*

*But the point is, you've got to jump on it. I didn't let anything slip by. I'm not saying we had the answer, most times we didn't. We just said, "Look brother, this issue is not fair." The UN Special Representative for Human Rights came and as soon as a got off the plane went straight to see some NGO, Human Rights NGO. The next statement he made in national newspaper here he says, "The Cambodian government doesn't care about the people, that's why they enter the WTO"—all sorts of statements that look good in a press release in New York.*

*I think in the end I earned his respect. That's all I wanted. Fairness is important. I'm not saying that what we did is the best in the world. But it is what we could do with what we have.*

MUKHERJEE: I'd like to talk about some organizational matters. For example you mentioned that there was a team of negotiators.

SIPHANA: Yes.

MUKHERJEE: And other colleagues. Now, were you leading that team?

---

SIPHANA: *De facto yes. On paper it was the Minister of Commerce. But the day-to-day running of the team I was responsible, yes.*

MUKHERJEE: Did you have any role in selecting the individuals who were on it?

SIPHANA: *Well, I can't really say that because they are civil servants, so you sort of pick the best of what ever you can. But I think that one of the best practices I think other countries could learn from us is how you do this, if you're the team leader, how do you act as a mentor? I never considered myself as the team leader—more in the good sense of the "big brother," not the bad sense. My team looked on me as the big brother: "Brother I need help." When we went to negotiate, I took a lot of pains to try and understand the issue because I'm just a lawyer. I'm not saying I know anything about customs, or agricultural subsidies, or telecom frequencies. I don't.*

*I made a lot of effort to try and understand a sector and then try to find some way to explain further—this is in the WTO context; this is what it means. I tried to be a bridge, a link, to make them feel like we were all in it together. We needed to help each other. We needed to console each other. We needed to comfort each other. We needed to help take the pressure off each other. I think this is important for a country where knowledge base is not obviously there. You're dealing with a non-trading country.*

*You go to America, you know how many thousand trade negotiators they have? We spent five days in Washington. We met at least thirty trade negotiators in different fields, they all specialize. When you walk into the room, they have stacks of documents on transport, on intellectual property. They come in and say, well, we'll negotiate on telecom now. So three people came; stacks of documents on telecom. We negotiated for two hours. They're done, thank you very much. They walk out. The next team comes in; another stack of documents, three or four people. We're the same six people, half asleep, looking to get coffee. Now we have to shift from telecom to tourism, then shift to tariffs. In a way it's not fair, but you've got to make do with what you have.*

*That is why team building is important—helping each other is very important. At the end, you see, you walk out much richer because you're more versatile. I never studied economics, I'm a lawyer. Now I must say I'm pretty good in that. Every month now I try to do one policy workshop at the Institute for Policy for young researchers there. I take as my basis what we negotiated in the WTO and how to implement government policy now based on those WTO negotiations. I must say that it makes you richer because it forces you to work harder. It's a lot more pressure, because you need to understand more sectors of the economy. But at the end of the day you can have much more coherence in policy making. So that's the upside.*

*Now we can look at policy from a coherent rather than specialized perspective—I'm in telecom, I just work in telecom; you're in intellectual property, you work in that. When you negotiate with the other countries they receive very clear instructions on the sector. Sometimes it is hard to make sense with some of these guys because the guy that you negotiate with IT—maybe he has a clue, but he doesn't give a [expletive deleted] about the other sector—because he wants his minister of telecom to be happy. But his Prime Minister has to make a statement that we should give a break to Cambodia or to Laos or whatever, right? See, that sort of thing, it is negotiated, different breed. They're human beings. They want to be promoted. They want to be ambassador. They want to*

---

*be minister like everybody else. So for them squeezing from the other side is part of their job.*

MUKHERJEE: And your teammates, were they sectoral specialists or were they also—

SIPHANA: *Yes, they were. Some in the ministry, we have a core team, but the rest are all from different ministries. I wouldn't say we have a core team, which is comprised of the WTO Secretariat in the Ministry of Commerce, but the others were part of the task force. We only have one or two good technicians. They look at technical issues. They defer policy decisions to their minister, the vice minister. But let's face it, at the end of the day, it is the technical people who actually will be defining the issue—rarely does the policy maker decide on his own. That is why it is so important that you spend a lot of time dealing with the capacity of the technical people so that they can brief the right issue. If not you'll be back in the wrong trees.*

MUKHERJEE: Then what did you do to build capacity in these individuals?

SIPHANA: *I think one of the most dramatic one was that we had to send some of our people for long term training abroad. It is a big cost because our team is not big. But you see, if you don't live and breathe and understand and think trade, it's very difficult. Sometimes you have to send a guy for a Master's degree in Australia or Japan. So the guy has to disappear for a year. But at least, when he comes back, he knows. We sent some to Geneva for example.*

*These are some of the extreme cases. But we find that those who went there are now the ones who are actually implementing. So there are long-term benefits to sending a guy away. For those who are a little bit more mature, we had a lot of ad hoc capacity building. We asked a lot of countries—even those we negotiated with—to help on capacity building, training, and workshops. One of the most tedious things that we did is that we took the time to translate—because our official language is Khmer, Cambodian.*

*Someone from a country that speaks French, for example, doesn't have to make an effort because the WTO document is in French already. But for us, because we have to translate, it is very tedious. Most of the terminology—technical terminology—we don't even have in our language. So we have to make a lot of effort to try and understand all that. But in the process you know we translated a trade dictionary, we translated the Uruguay Round. We translated trade policy books. God knows how many books we translated. So when we translate we say, "Okay, look, you're working agriculture right? Good, you translate anything to do with agriculture." The guy is complaining, moaning, bitching, whatever, but six months, a year later when he's done, by God you ask him, he knows everything in and out.*

*For every page that he translated, he may have to edit ten times. You emerge out of the process with knowledge internalized. One funny anecdote: it's not that we read a lot, but because we have to translate we have to make a lot of notes in the book and it looks old. We go to Geneva and some of our trade negotiators walked in the room and saw on the table that every one of us have this beat-up, worn-out, set of books. They think, "Wow, these guys know their stuff!" It's not true.*

*By forcing myself to edit all this work I learn in the process. I didn't have a choice because I needed to know. I needed to show that I'm helping them; I'm behind them, that I'm not going for just a free ride. So document is that thick.*

MUKHERJEE: You spoke about building a sense of mission and *esprit de corps* in your team. Were there any special incentives or management techniques that you put into practice to do that?

SIPHANA: *We don't have direct financial incentives for civil servants. I happened to have for one-year access to some funding from the integrated Framework for Trade Relations for LDC (Least Developed Countries). At that time, Japan gave us a small grant and I was able to pay the team extra money for a year on top of their salary. But that's not the point. The point is more how do I motivate them? How do I give them a sense of nationhood? How do I give them a sense of pride? How do I give them a sense that this is what you're doing? It may not be the lucrative thing such as signing export license when the private sector gives you some under-the-table fee or something. But this gives you an intellectual pride that you know someday this will be your ticket to your career. This will be your ticket to your promotion or something.*

*I can tell you, one guy who is now in Geneva, he is a deputy chief mission in Geneva. When I was working in Geneva for the WTO and the International Trade Center there, I would go to many meetings in the WTO where I would sit at the ITC table and the Cambodian would be at the other table. I'm sitting there and he used to be part of my team. Then every time he raised his Cambodian nameplate and he got the floor, I couldn't help but to say, I'm proud. I'm very proud that he can defend the interests of Cambodia. At the end we always go for coffee. I say, "I'm very proud of you, we came a long way, we came a long way."*

*I think there are a lot of psychological things here. We went through so much psychological devastation. I think this country still has not recovered from the trauma of the killing fields, of the years of the genocide. We have not recovered. The Khmer Rouge trial that is ongoing right now is a test case where it is tormenting all of us psychologically every day. But I must say we have to start giving a sense of pride to the people, the Cambodian people that what happened is not the Cambodia we know. It is something that is beyond us. But that experience should not kill us psychologically. We can do the right thing; we can do the good thing. It is never late to do something good for your country.*

*It is like Google. I always say that nowadays nobody can escape Google. You may do the bad thing ten years ago, but it is never too late to start building the first two pages of your Google when you click. You can do a lot of good things the last two years, and believe me, people can still find you on the fifteenth page of the Google. Maybe they find some bull[expletive deleted] there. But the first two pages at least you are the good man, you are revived, you are reborn. I see a lot of this now and that gives me a lot of hope.*

MUKHERJEE: So looking back on your experience negotiating and also pushing for reforms in various sectors, can you recall an instance where you failed to achieve what you were trying to achieve? Any specific initiative that you tried to push forward and you were unable to do so for any reason and how you dealt with that?

SIPHANA: *You know pushing regulation laws is probably the most frustrating thing that drives me crazy the most. Was I mad in those days? Well, I was mad most of the time. But then when you calm down after a good night's sleep, you go to the countryside—you come to terms. There's no ill will. You see, if there is ill will then you continue to be mad. You look back and say, "Damn, it's not that they don't want to, it's just that resources are not there, capacity is not there, appreciation of the issue is not there, understanding the issue is just beyond us."*

*You can talk about anti-dumping. Who understands anti-dumping? Countervailing duties? What the [expletive deleted] is that? Even me, I don't know. The TRIP, public health, my God, I mean, what are they? So I think it is more this feeling of being helpless, this feeling of being powerless. This feeling that you could have done more that drives you crazy. But then you must come to terms. I've become very pragmatic. Over the years I've come to terms. To change a country revolution will not do; evolution will do. Pissing off, cursing outside the fence will not change anything. It is how do you help change from the inside? It is like flower blossoming from inside. So how do we help stimulate reform from inside, taking into account all our own idiosyncratic things, the good, the bad, the ugly— how do we take all that into account? How do we come to terms with that? How do we harness our strength? What are we good at and how do we forgive? Sometimes we need to forgive a witness. Sometimes we need to forgive our past. Sometimes we need to forgive the shortcomings of our neighbors, of our colleagues, of our collaborators. But how do you also find the strength to help them, to overcome that?*

*I think it requires a lot of wisdom. That's why I do a lot of martial arts because it helps me calm myself. It helps me concentrate. It helps me find some inner peace, meditation, you know, when you sweat for one hour doing karate. The kata for example, kata takes a lot of intense concentration because you need to remember. It has to be a reflection to do 64 movements in less than one minute. As the belt goes higher you need to do not just the movement like ballet, but you need to do it with intensity. You need to do it with concentration. You need to breathe. You need to synchronize the motion, everything. You cannot afford one split second of distraction. You make a mistake and then you're out.*

*You know we have different techniques where you're supposed to do the same thing in less than eleven seconds. It's not about the form. It is: do you remember the sequence or not? Then five minutes later the teacher, the Sensei says, "Now you must do as long as possible. Instead of eleven seconds you need to stretch to three, four minutes, that same movement." Then suddenly you keep making mistakes because your mind goes faster than the movement or your movement goes faster than your mind. Either way you make mistakes.*

*So I mean, how do you concentrate? I find doing martial arts is so healthy. I'm 49. I'm quite fit. But psychologically it helps a lot to overcome the stress, the pressure. You find your Zen, you find your inner peace. You're a little detached from the nitty-gritty, the reality of the world—of the power and everything. It cuts all that [expletive deleted] out. I have a function to do, I have a duty to do, I have an objective to achieve. I may be tired tonight but I need to sleep well so that I wake up at five, I'm fresh, but I have one goal in mind. I've got to do it. But it is a mental discipline. I'm so used to it now. I work twelve, thirteen, fourteen hour days, I don't stop. But I'm happy. I don't stop, but I'm happy. It's not like I'm miserable or anything.*

*On weekends we have a band. I have a band at home. I play guitar. We have a full band, drums. My daughter plays classical piano, my son does drums. I have a lot of colleagues in the government who come and jam with us. To me, when we do karate, or when we do the band, I'm not the WTO, I'm not the lawyer, I am just a free bird, exploding, living life.*

MUKHERJEE: So a lot of people say that having a vision and articulating it is essential for a reformer for a reform to go forward. Would you agree with that and if so what vision did you have and did you articulate it?

*SIPHANA: It is good to have a vision, but you must be able to articulate it because a lot of people have vision, but not are able to pass the message. But you also have to live the vision. You have to live your principles. Without that, people will not feel your sincerity. In the accession days, I was known as "Mr. WTO". I lived it. I had this passion. I did karate because I wanted to be better for my WTO thing, so I can have more energy to work late, to wake up in the morning with a sharp mind. I wanted to be fit so when I travel, I get off the plane; I take a nice shower, do sixty pushups, half an hour exercise in my room. I go straight to meetings and then I hop on a plane back. You know in Geneva I did over 100 days per year traveling around the world, yet I'm fit. My wife couldn't understand it. I get off the plane, I say honey, I'm fit. But to me you have to live the vision. Because if people do not feel that you are sincere, if you don't walk the talk, they say you're full of it, that you're just a manipulator. Of course, sometimes you have to manipulate because you have no choice, but you will not get away for the second time, forget about the third time.*

*You've got to be able to articulate. I happen to have the gift of the gab. That's what my friends say. But it's not enough. I have to believe it. To me believing is through my deeds, through my actions. What does it mean believing it? It means that if I had to work until midnight to spend time to correct a paper done by my team whose English is not good, but whose technical substance is there, but that we have to deliver tomorrow, that's living it. Because how many vice ministers take the time to correct the letter of his subordinate? Not many believe me. "I'm the boss, you do it. You do the right thing, that's your job. You do the wrong thing, you're no good." To me it's the opposite. I say, "Look, do your best. We'll try to find some way. You take all the credit; I don't need to be anywhere. I don't have to be visible."*

*I write a speech for the boss, for the minister. Nobody needs to know I'm doing it. Only he needs to know whether it's good enough. You're the boss, you can have the limelight. So I think its commitment for higher goals, which requires sacrifice. You pinch, it hurts. You caress you feel better. To me we all respond to our ego. We want to be recognized. I feel that to be a leader you must give up all that. I wouldn't say you need to have a good life. Of course you've got to have food on the table, car to drive, kids to school. That I will never—I think it would be hypocritical for me to say I don't care about that, I do care for it. But I'm saying beyond that threshold, you have to be able to give up that so that you can deliver what you can.*

*A lot of people think I'm crazy to give up a UN career as a director in Geneva. I mean I had a good pension, good life. I could stay until retirement. My kids were in international school. Why would I come back home and restart life? My pay is nothing here. But I say, "Look, I have reached a point where I have this identity crisis. I'm asking myself what is my raison d'être, my reason of being, who am I? I felt that in Geneva, half of my day signing UN documents is not me. It doesn't matter. I want to be in the field. I want to be in Cambodia, I want to push things; I want to do things where I feel that I can matter.*

*Now I am going to teach at university. I want to share that. I'm going to spend a lot of my time mentoring the younger generation. Compared to a UN director's salary, believe me my friend, it is one-fiftieth of the pay. But I don't look miserable. I don't look unhappy. Three meals a day. I couldn't finish two bowls of noodles in the morning. I have a house, I have a car. That's it. I'm okay now. My own happiness now is to be a role model. I want to be able to say, "Look, this country has gone through so much. Those who are more fortunate should give.*

---

*I'm not saying that I'm educated, I'm better. No, I'm just saying I'm more fortunate than others. To run away as a refugee, I could have stepped on a landmine and died. To be in America as a refugee, you know is not easy either. I struggled. I got education. I got a good job, whatever. I just happened to be more lucky than others. I should give.*

*I find more happiness to give than to take. To me that is the ultimate test of being a leader. Vision, communicate, articulate, lead, and give. You'd be surprised how much will come. I think when I die I won't take nothing with me, but I want to leave my legacy here. I want to leave my name intact. I want to leave my reputation there. I want my kid to grow up proud of me. That's why I'm back.*

MUKHERJEE: One last question. As WTO negotiator, you had to deal at the international level with a lot of people and you had to also convince a lot of people at home about the benefits. That required certainly a lot of information to be compiled at a very short notice.

SIPHANA: Yes.

MUKHERJEE: As you said you were already overstressed for capacity on your team.

SIPHANA: Yes.

MUKHERJEE: So where did you turn to for information in those times because on a daily basis, someone at your level would be so busy, with so many different things, were there any individuals or a think tank or somebody that you relied on for advice, input on these matters?

SIPHANA: *I must say that in the accession days advice was never short. We had so many organizations that gave advice. But the issue, as you know, in terms of capacity is all about internal capability; it is not about the information availability. Because if you Google, you have a lot of stuff also. Missions that come give you a lot of good advice, but how do you have the time to internalize? When people give you something, you have to understand there is always somewhere, some background agenda. Sometimes it is honest, sincere advice; sometimes it is premeditated, selfish, bilateral advice—more for their own gain than for our own gain.*

*We had to have a minimum base of people, a team, who could absorb information needed for our first threshold decisions. Then it moved to the policy threshold. This is where you have to choose between four options, left, right, west, north, south, right? This is more the tricky part. I'm not in Congress. I'm just a lawyer and when I started I was not even a trade lawyer. I was just a commercial lawyer. When some country comes, to negotiate with us, or some agency comes to try to give us advice, or some bilateral people come to give us some help, I'm always asking questions like (Ronald) Reagan and (Mikhail) Gorbachev. Gorbachev said they're dismantling nuclear warheads. Reagan always said, "Trust, but verify." I always said, "Good, I take your advice, but I'd like to verify. I'd like to ask my other friends."*

*I like people who don't mind telling me, "That's fine. Look, if you go left, this is what will happen. If you don't do anything, this is what will happen. If you choose to take this path this is what will happen. That's it, I'm gone, I'm going to the pool now, I'll see you for dinner." As compared to, "This is good for you. Do this; it's very good for you. Believe me, we care for you." Oh, I'm very worried when I have people come and say, "Look, we love Cambodia and we really want*

---

*Cambodia to succeed." I'm a little bit worried when I hear that. So how do you screen out that?*

*I go to the source. You know I travel quite a bit, and not being an economist, not being a trade guy, the first place I stop is a bookstore. Good, go to WTO, I go to bookstore, I go to airport, I go to bookstore. What is the latest Nobel laureate who has written about anything about that? Amartya Sen. I bought him, new author. God knows how many books that I bought in these bookstores and on the plane. I just gobble it up, and try to understand here what is the thinking, why this guy has a Nobel Prize?*

*Hey, wait a minute. You know, when the World Bank came, he was quoting this guy, hmm. Okay, I'd better dig a little bit more because there's some merit in that, right? So in a way it is like how do you ultimately try to understand what is the motivating drive of the guy who comes to see you, or the guy who comes to try and help you. Because many times there is the Cambodian saying that, "We give you the meat, but we'll never give you the forest." So I'm going to try and find out what forest he's going hunting in, then I understand.*

*So to me, there's no substitute for sweat and time and commitment. In my home I have a library four times bigger than this room—my personal library I accumulated over the years. Somebody, my friend, can borrow money, I'd probably forget about it. But I will not forget somebody who borrows my books. There is no shortcut for success. There's no shortcut for being a good negotiator, to be a good leader. You have to sweat. You have to read. You have to invest. You have to commit. I just don't see any other way.*

*You know when a leader, when you read somebody's speech, written by somebody else, you don't feel it. I never have other people write speeches for me. When I was minister, vice-minister, when I was in ITC (International Trade Commission), I say you can give me bullets or something, the issue, because I may not get that issue, but I want to research it on my own. I will try to find my own understanding of the issue. This requires time. That's it.*

MUKHERJEE: Just a technical point. What made you leave the government once the accession was complete?

SIPHANA: *I felt a big, sort of let down because I felt like there's no more challenge. During accession the WTO thing was so huge, so enormous. To be able to work on that issue across agencies, with everybody, it was a huge thing. When I finished, I didn't see any challenge. I just didn't see what was more exciting.*

*Then, at that time the Prime Minister was proposing that I was the Cambodian candidate to run for the Secretary-General, U Thant at that time. He wrote to Kofi Annan and proposed me as a candidate. So I was running for that post for a while. I said, well, it's a good challenge. I was quite young, so there is a long learning curve for that. But I thought, well it is a big honor that the PM considered me for that.*

*After that I just feel like what's next? When the UN thing didn't work out, a month later I was flying somewhere, I saw the "Economist." The advertisement for this post was open and when I got off the plane I called Geneva to ask, "is this post a political post or just a professional post?" They said, "No, it is just director level, it is just a professional post. You apply to us. You compete, interview." Okay, I said, in that case, yes. So I competed for the post and I got it. So I did almost four years and I feel that there is no more challenge for me. It becomes too*

---

*monotonous now—good life, good wine, good mountain rides, good business class trips. There's no more excitement in life. I say well, time to plow the field again, the rice field, I'm back.*

*People ask me, "What's next?" I want to raise the flag for my country. Now my goal is that some day I want to be given the honor to be the Cambodian candidate again to run for UN office, but as Cambodian candidate—not as Sok Siphana, as Cambodia. It is like preparing for the Olympiad or something. Maybe small agency, whatever, doesn't matter. But the point is that Cambodia, after all these years of devastation, after working so hard to open the country, the economy, we're doing good, but we are not represented at all in the international scene. Cambodia, we do not have any political appointment in the UN, nor in the WTO nor in international organizations. Why? Because we just emerged from the war. We're still in the reconstruction stage. So it is just that most of the resources are still in the building-up phase. I'd like to be given that shot and I would run for it to be the Cambodian candidate, to run for some UN political office whenever it's open. Win or lose I don't care. The point is I want to put Cambodia on the map. I'd like to give a run for the money against other country's candidates to say Cambodia matters now, we exist now.*

*Recently, last week—no, a couple of days ago, Cambodia, we won a seat in the permanent committee on UNESCO. For Cambodia, it is important because we were out of the international community for so long. So that's my ambition. My ambition is more how do I raise the flag for my country, at least for one mandate, that's it, three, four years, that's it. After that I want to come home and plow my rice field.*

MUKHERJEE: Well, is there anything else you'd like to add. We're putting this together as a resource that will help leaders and policy makers in other parts of the world who are struggling with developing institutions, strong institutions for the state. So do you have anything else you'd like to add?

SIPHANA: *Maybe I have to add, close something more on more philosophy because most of the big leaders in different countries they're well educated. So education, experience is not an issue most of the time. But I want to quote a small anecdote from the Deputy Director General of the WTO, Mrs. Valentine (Sendanyoye) Rogwabiza. She is a good friend, and before I left Geneva, I went to say farewell to her. She took me to lunch. So I told her the reason why I wanted to come home. As we walked back to the WTO she says, "You know, I respect your decision because (she's from Rwanda) one time Cambodia and we shared the same tragic history, genocide, and everything, a lot of brain drain." She said, "I respect your decision because for you to have a good life here, career and everything, to give all that up to go help your country where your expertise is needed most, it is not in Geneva, but where your expertise, your knowledge is needed most, that I respect."*

*I would say maybe more a plea, maybe more, among colleagues as an ex-UN senior official, as an ex-member of government, to other colleagues of similar situation to say nobody can help your country more than you. Nobody cares about your country more than you. To make the country happen, only you can make it happen. Most of us have combined knowledge to make our country grow and thrive, but it is a personal decision, a personal sacrifice, a personal commitment between the personal good and the national good. Do we want to continue our life, living a beautiful life in Geneva, New York, Brussels, drinking good red Bordeaux wine, spending our weekends on the mountain at Lake Avian Nobody can say, it's your life, it's your decision. You worked hard to get a Ph.D.,*

---

*to compete for this big senior position. Hey, you earned it. But it's not in Geneva, it's not in New York, it's not in Brussels or Washington that your country needs you. It is in your capital. It's in your community. It is in your hometown, that you can affect change in your country. That is probably the biggest call that everyone of us as leaders must make. In governance the same thing. Once you're home, you must balance between private interests and national interests. Remember, when you die you don't take anything with you. What you leave behind is a legacy. Leave a legacy that will last forever.*

MUKHERJEE: Thank you.

SIPHANA: You're welcome.