



2020 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

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2020 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

For Cambodia

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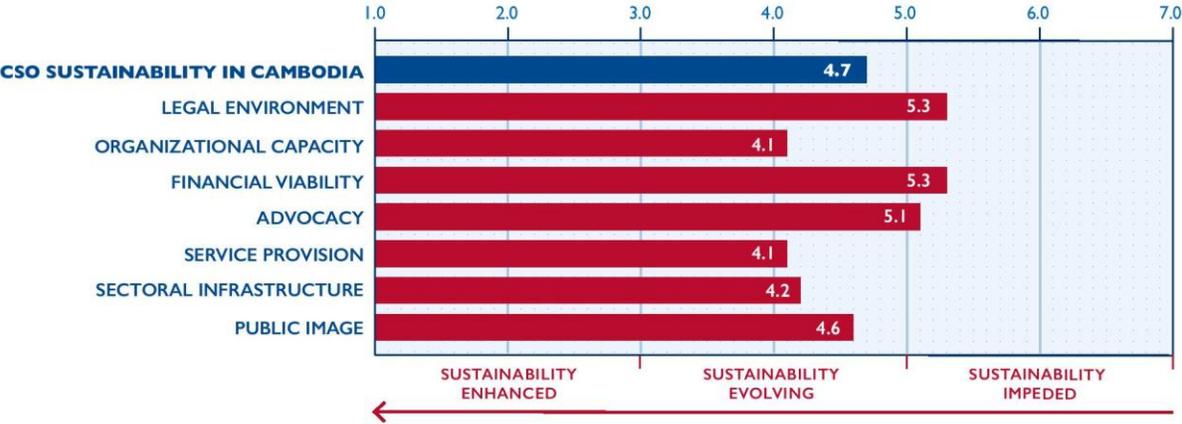
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CAMBODIA

Capital: Phnom Penh
Population: 17,304,363
GDP per capita (PPP): \$4,389
Human Development Index: Medium (0.594)
Freedom in the World: Not Free (24/100)

OVERALL CSO SUSTAINABILITY: 4.7



While Cambodia’s political environment has long been dominated by the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP), even semi-competitive elections were made impossible in 2017, when the Supreme Court dissolved the primary opposition party for alleged plans to overthrow the government. As a result, the CPP won all 125 seats in the National Assembly in 2018 and the party controls 58 of 62 senate seats. In 2020, Freedom House categorized Cambodia as “not free” in its Freedom in the World 2021 report, and the country received low scores on both the Global Freedom Score (25 out of 100) and the Internet Freedom Score (43 out of 100). Freedom of expression was also restricted in 2020, and the government brought several charges of incitement against media outlets under Article 495 of the Criminal Code. Both internet freedom and freedom of expression are expected to decline further in the coming year, following the government’s February 2021 announcement of a new national internet firewall.

Cambodia continues to be ranked low in terms of overall development performance. Cambodia’s 2019 Human Development Index (HDI) value was 0.594 out of 1.0, positioning it at 144 out of 189 countries; after adjusting for inequality, that number drops to 0.475. In Transparency International’s 2020 Corruption Perception Index (CPI), Cambodia received a score of 21 out of 100, a slight improvement from its 2019 score of 20. On the 2020 Economic Freedom Index, Cambodia ranked 113 out of 186 countries, with an unchanged score from 2019 due to an increase in “fiscal health” offset by a decline in “judicial effectiveness.” Among the four dimensions included in that metric, Cambodia performed particularly poorly on rule of law, in which the government’s integrity was scored at 14.8 out of 100 in 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented further challenges in 2020. Early measures to curb travel within and into Cambodia, alongside the closure of schools and workplaces, helped limit the spread, and only 364 total cases and zero deaths were reported by the end of the year. However, the pandemic took a toll on the economy, particularly in sectors that drive Cambodia’s growth. The tourism industry lost \$850 million in revenue, while the garment and footwear industry experienced a 6.5 percent decline, and the construction and manufacturing industry was affected by a 12 percent decline in imports and exports. For workers engaged in these three sectors and in wholesale and retail trade, incomes dropped by 53 to 61 percent by September 2020, greatly increasing poverty rates and food insecurity. Though in the previous five years, Cambodia’s gross domestic product (GDP) had grown at an average annual rate of 7.1 percent, in 2020 the kingdom’s GDP fell by 3.1 percent.

In April 2020, Cambodia enacted the Law on National Management in the State of Emergency in preparation for the potential impacts of COVID-19. The law provided the government with broad new powers, including banning meetings and gatherings, restricting travel, mobilizing the military, and increasing surveillance and media restrictions. The Cambodian government also implemented a range of measures to assist communities affected by the pandemic, including a cash transfer program in June 2020 to support poor and vulnerable households. Also in 2020, laws were drafted addressing public order and cybercrime. CSOs expressed concern that these laws, if

implemented, would further curtail freedom of expression and legitimize restrictions on civic space in Cambodia. Neither draft had been signed into law by the end of the year, and the draft law on cybercrime had yet to even be publicly released.

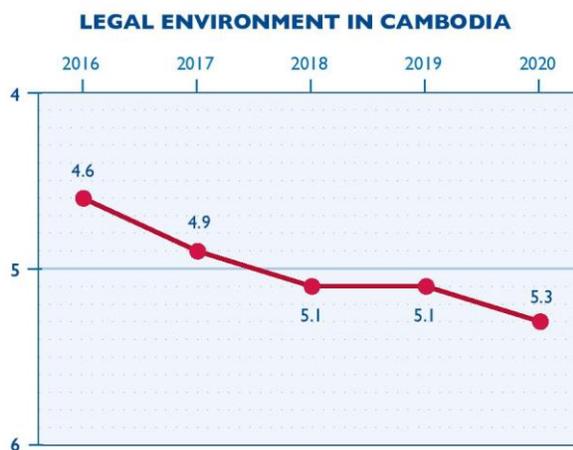
In this context, the overall sustainability of the CSO sector in Cambodia slightly deteriorated in 2020, with slight declines in four of the seven dimensions—organizational capacity, financial viability, advocacy, and public image—and a moderate decline in the legal environment. CSOs working on human rights and democracy issues continued to confront significant challenges in the operation and implementation of their programs. Service provision and the infrastructure supporting the sector remained unchanged.

According to the CIVICUS Monitor’s 2020 report, Cambodia’s legal framework continues to be misused to repress civil movements and liberties. Harassment also continued in 2020, targeting media outlets, trade union leaders, and human rights and environmental activists. According to police spokespeople, more than forty people were arrested for spreading pandemic-related “fake news,” and two journalists were sentenced for incitement after reporting on government comments regarding COVID-19 and criticizing the government’s response.

The majority of CSOs focused on service delivery in 2020, while a small number of them worked on human rights, democracy, and the environment. Donors continued to support CSOs working in the health, education, social protection, gender, human rights, democracy, environment, and knowledge sectors. CSOs receiving foreign support—which typically operate at the national level or are international NGOs (INGOs)—generally had sufficient human resources and financial management capacity. There continues to be very limited information on sub-national CSOs.

According to the latest estimates, released in April 2019 by the Phnom Penh governor, approximately 5,523 local NGOs were registered with the Ministry of Interior (MoI), while 419 foreign NGOs had signed memorandums of understanding with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MoFA). According to Cambodia’s Official Development Assistance (ODA) database, only 260 foreign NGOs and 146 local NGOs remain active in Cambodia. However, this estimate is based solely on ODA projects, and accurate information regarding the full NGO landscape in Cambodia remains limited. In October 2020, a proposed NGO census to be carried out by the MoI was cancelled after human rights and advocacy organizations raised concerns that the government would use the information to target staff and activists.

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 5.3



The legal environment governing CSOs moderately deteriorated in 2020, fueled by the adoption of the Law on National Management in the State of Emergency and increased state harassment against human rights defenders, trade unions, and media outlets. The stricter enforcement of the legal framework without meaningful amendments also contributed to the deterioration of the legal environment.

In 2020, CSOs continued to face challenges in complying with existing regulations, including the Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations (LANGO), the Law on Trade Unions (LTU), the Law on Telecommunications (LOT), and the broader criminal codes.

LANGO distinguishes between local and international CSOs. Local CSOs must register with MoI. To do so, an organization must first obtain approval from the local authorities in the areas in which it intends to operate, including the chief of the sub-district, the governor of the district, or the governor of the province. Both the director and chief of finance of a local CSO must be Cambodian citizens. INGOs must register by entering into a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with MoFA. An INGO must then sign a project agreement with MoFA before it can begin work. MOUs are valid for three years and must be renewed prior to their expiration in order for the CSO to continue work.

LANGO lacks procedural guarantees and provides the government with significant discretion to determine whether to accept or reject an organization's application for registration. For example, the law allows the government to deny registration of CSOs presumed to harm "national security, stability, public order, culture and good traditions of Cambodian society" and requires that CSOs be neutral to all political parties. In August 2020, seventy-five NGOs submitted a letter to Mol requesting the revision of fourteen articles of LANGO that restrict civic space.

In April 2020, the government signed the Law on National Management in the State of Emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The law provides the government with sweeping powers over the media and the dissemination of information and bans or limits foreign and domestic travel, gatherings, and professional activities. The law also enables the government to seize property and mobilize or displace populations as deemed necessary, fix the price of goods and services, carry out unlimited digital surveillance, impose quarantines, close public or private places, and perform any other activities deemed necessary. Because Cambodia did not see a significant number of COVID-19 cases in 2020, the law was not invoked during the year. However, as the government may make use of the law as it deems necessary, CSOs feared that it could become a tool to further weaken the role of civil society. This concern was echoed by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT) in the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders 2020 Report. Released in July 2020, the report warned that if implemented, the law would lead to a repression of civil rights, including the freedoms of movement, expression, association, and peaceful assembly.

The FIDH and OMCT report also found that Cambodia's authorities increasingly monitored and interfered with CSO activities in 2020. The Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) reports that in 2020, 11 percent of CSO and activist assemblies were subject to unlawful state force, a huge increase in such incidences compared to 0.5 percent two years prior. For instance, seventeen CSOs organized a celebration for International Women's Day in March 2020 after obtaining authorization from the Phnom Penh city government. However, local authorities arbitrarily limited tent sizes to 4x6 meters and the number of participants to just 200. Threats from authorities ahead of International Women's Day celebrations were also reported in Pursat and Kampong Spue provinces. In June 2020, young environmental activists were banned from cycling from Koh Kong to Phnom Penh as part of the Save Koh Kong Krao Island initiative.

In February 2020, a group of trade unions and other organizations representing workers issued a joint statement calling for an amendment of the LTU to grant more space for low-paid workers to organize and for unions to support their members. The statement also emphasized that these CSOs were not satisfied with prior amendments to the law, which offered minor revisions in response to their concerns for freedoms of assembly and association.

According to the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC), "incitement" as defined in Article 495 of the Criminal Code has been used to repress journalists, human rights and environmental activists, trade unions, and government critics. In the Cambodia Fundamental Freedoms Monitor, CCHR reported that between April and December 2020, 384 incidents were recorded involving the repression or violation of fundamental freedoms, including eleven CSO trainings that were ceased or monitored by the government. These incidents peaked in July 2020, with a surge in harassment and arrests of activists following the arrest and incitement charge of prominent union leader Rong Chhun for his remarks regarding the Cambodia-Vietnam border. On September 3, three environmental rights defenders were arrested and later charged with incitement after attempting to organize a peaceful march from Wat Phnom to the prime minister's residence. On September 10, rapper Kea Sokun was arrested and charged with incitement after releasing the songs "Khmer Land" and "Sad Race," which addressed social issues like land grabbing, hunger, and poverty, and encouraged listeners to challenge oppression and corruption. In total, CCHR reported that 217 people were summoned, 85 arrested, and 53 charged for exercising fundamental freedoms between April and December 2020. Human Rights Watch further reported that over sixty journalists, activists, and political opposition leaders were arbitrarily detained in 2020.

Social media posts concerning COVID-19 and its impacts spurred further arrests. FIDH and OMCT reported that more than forty people had been arrested for Facebook posts on the issue between the start of the pandemic and May 13, 2020. The director of TVFB, for example, was arrested in April 2020 and later charged with incitement to commit a felony after posting about the economic effects of COVID-19 on motorbike-taxi drivers. In June 2020, the publisher of the Cheat Khmer newspaper was arrested and later charged with incitement for a Facebook post criticizing Prime Minister Hun Sen for not providing solutions for those in debt during COVID-19. According to

the Cambodia Fundamental Freedoms Monitor, only 28 percent of respondents felt they were able to speak freely on social media between April and December 2020.

There were no notable changes to CSO taxation in 2020. According to the Law on Taxation and Prakas No. 464 MEF.BrK, NGOs are exempt from income taxes if they are exclusively operated for the purposes of religion, charity, science, literature, or education, and no part of their property or income is used for private interests. However, CSO capacity to adhere to the taxation framework remains low, particularly among those at provincial and sub-national levels and community-based organizations (CBOs). CSOs are particularly concerned about the cost of compliance and, at the grassroots level, lack a strong understanding of taxation requirements.

CSOs in Cambodia can raise funds domestically or internationally, provided that they adhere to the relevant legal and taxation frameworks. Some CSOs reported that in 2020, the process of transferring funds from donors or international affiliates to Cambodia-registered CSOs was more difficult. For instance, when some CSOs were not able to provide complete documentation quickly enough, banks refused to approve the transfer and funds were sent back to their point of origin without the knowledge of the locally registered CSOs.

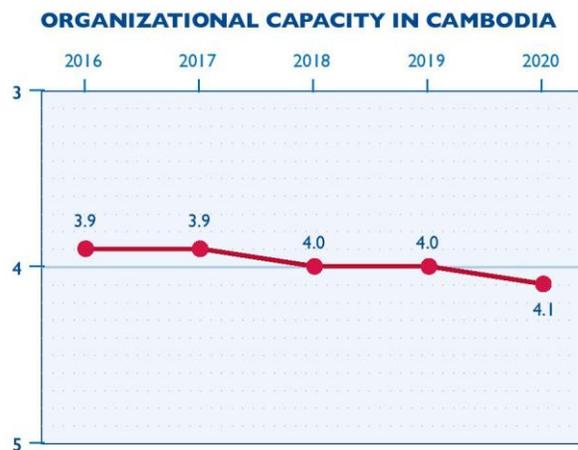
The legal capacity of CSOs remains limited. Some organizations, such as CCC and Transparency International, offer capacity building and legal consultations to CSOs. However, existing capacity-building activities are insufficient to support all CSOs across the full range of levels and sectors. CCC, for instance, has only two legal experts to serve more than 200 member CSOs.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: 4.1

The CSO sector's organizational capacity slightly deteriorated in 2020. In addition to the continuing constraints caused by the political environment and limited available funding, CSOs were further restricted by the impacts of COVID-19. They lacked the capacity to mobilize and provide necessary services due to health restrictions and were limited in their capacity to adopt new technologies and develop needed online platforms during the pandemic. However, the shifting priorities of some CSOs demonstrated resilience in the face of these challenges, offsetting what otherwise could have been greater deterioration in this dimension.

CSOs experienced different challenges as they worked to build and support their respective constituencies in 2020. Those working in traditional service delivery areas such as health, education, and livelihood were directly impacted by COVID-19 and had to alter their activities following the government's guidelines for safety and prevention. Women's advocacy organizations paused their usual community events and instead researched the impact of the pandemic on working women. NGOs in the education field shifted their focus away from training and extracurricular activities and instead helped schools procure personal protective equipment (PPE), sanitize classrooms, and provide students with access to technology during school closures. Those representing workers, however, continued to have in-person contact with constituents in order to ensure workers' rights during the pandemic. By July—the economic trough of the pandemic in the kingdom in 2020—the impact of COVID-19 had caused approximately 150,000 garment workers in Cambodia to lose their jobs, according to the Business and Human Rights Resource Center. According to Khmer Times, around 60,000 workers in the tourism sector also lost their jobs in 2020. Trade unions and workers' associations represented those who had been laid off without proper compensation.

CSOs' goals and missions continue to be heavily influenced by donor priorities, given their dependence on donor funds. However, there were a few cases during the year in which CSOs worked strategically with selected donors to address their constituencies' needs. For instance, the United Sisterhood—a coalition of four organizations representing sex workers, garment factory workers, farmers, and artists focused on advancing social justice and equity for women workers—only accepted support from donors that buttressed their primary advocacy agenda.



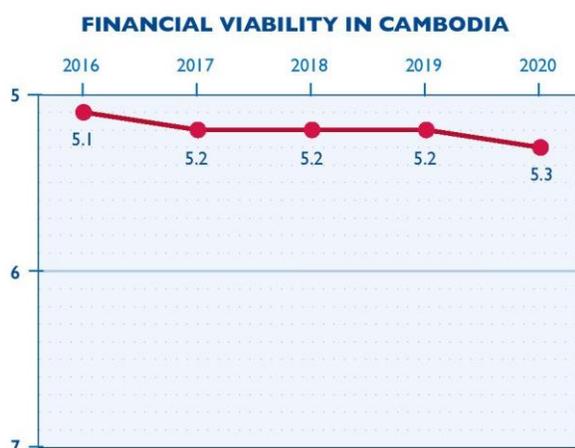
CSOs varied greatly in their capacity to design and implement strategic plans in 2020. INGOs and domestic CSOs working at the national level had sufficient capacity to design and implement their strategic plans. At the provincial and sub-national levels, CSOs modestly strengthened their capacity to set long-term goals and targets compared to the previous year. However, many CBOs, especially in the labor sector, lacked the strategic planning and administrative support they previously received from larger NGOs, as COVID-19 restrictions limited their direct contact. Many CSOs continued to face challenges implementing their strategic plans, a problem that was exacerbated by COVID-19 restrictions and the shift in focus in order to meet constituents' immediate needs.

This same pattern was evident in CSOs' internal management structures, with international and national CSOs typically having the greatest capacity and more clearly defined management structures. According to CCC's CSO Road Map 2020–2025, CSOs under the CCC umbrella have notable limitations in collaboration, capacity, management succession planning, and ownership. LANGO requires CSOs to develop formal management structures, including boards of directors to provide strategic and financial oversight, and organizational regulations for human resource management and other issues. However, the extent to which boards provide support to their organizations varies widely.

CSOs at all levels continued to face challenges retaining and recruiting qualified staff. This is due to the more competitive benefits and salaries offered by the private sector. This trend slowed in 2020, however, partly due to the disruption of the private sector during the pandemic. CSOs working on human rights, political rights, and democracy faced additional staffing challenges due to the continued closing of civic space and increasing threat of harassment. For instance, the Cambodia Food and Service Workers Federation struggled to recruit qualified staff for certain positions, such as advocacy directors and community organizers.

Both domestic and international CSOs, primarily those based in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, had access to the internet and good information communication technology (ICT) equipment, and they increasingly made use of social media platforms to spread their messages. CBOs in remote villages, however, still faced numerous difficulties in accessing ICT. This gap was increasingly visible in 2020, as COVID-19 forced CSOs to move much of their work to online platforms, presenting serious challenges for those with limited ICT capacity. For example, trade unions and their members had limited ICT capacity, making it difficult for them to mobilize workers, organize meetings, and provide capacity building. While internet affordability, speed, and access are gradually improving in Cambodia, there are still large gaps in digital literacy, especially among rural residents. In addition, activists sometimes avoid online communication due to confidentiality concerns.

FINANCIAL VIABILITY: 5.3



CSOs' financial viability slightly deteriorated in 2020, joining the legal environment as one of the weakest dimensions of CSO sustainability in Cambodia. Key factors influencing this change include a shift in donor funding toward pandemic relief instead of traditional programming, difficulty maintaining contact with foreign donors, and difficulty accessing financial support and usual fundraising opportunities due to travel restrictions and the shift to online work. Limitations due to ICT capacity particularly impacted provincial and sub-national CSOs.

According to CCC's CSO Road Map 2020–2025, 22 percent of member CSOs reported securing their funding for periods of between three and five years, 41 percent reported that their financial support was secure

for a period between one and three years, and 37 percent reported financial support of six months to one year.

CSOs in Cambodia continued to lack diverse sources of funding, posing a significant challenge to their long-term sustainability. They remain heavily dependent on international donor support both to operate (particularly for overhead costs) and to implement programs. Key foreign donors include the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the European Union, the Open Society Foundation, and the Asia Foundation, with the United States,

Australia, Sweden, and Japan as the leading bilateral donors. In November 2020, the Swedish government announced it would transfer its embassy from Phnom Penh to Bangkok, noting that increasing authoritarianism in Cambodia had impeded the embassy's pursuits of democratic cooperation. Although the announcement stated that the transfer would not affect programmatic operations or funding in Cambodia, over seventy-five local NGOs signed a letter expressing their concern that the move would diminish financial support for their organizations.

In 2020, overall donor funding for CSOs increased, but only CSOs with sufficient capacity in grant writing, financial reporting, monitoring and evaluation, and report writing were able to benefit from that increase. Most of these CSOs were national NGOs and INGOs. CSOs at the provincial and sub-national levels are not yet equipped with the necessary financial and human resource capacities to compete with national NGOs and INGOs. Additionally, much of the funding, including almost all new funding in 2020, was for COVID-19 relief projects or operations. Many NGOs faced more difficulties than normal in securing funding for ongoing or upcoming projects unrelated to the pandemic. For instance, Action Aid Cambodia reported that since the outbreak of the pandemic, 70 percent of its programs have halted. Additionally, many human rights and advocacy organizations that rely on overseas travel to maintain contact with foreign donors faced fundraising challenges.

Donors support CSOs in health, education, social protection, research, human rights, environment, gender, and other areas. Kampuchea Action to Promote Education (KAPE), the largest local education NGO, received \$1 million from the Kinchan Stiftung Foundation. New funding from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (GFATM) allowed volunteer coordinators for Cambodia's Forum Network of People Living with HIV and AIDS and Most at Risk Populations (FoNPAMS) to finally earn a salary. The U.S. Embassy supported the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace's *Journal of Greater Mekong Studies*, and the Swedish Embassy promised up to \$610,000 to the policy think tank Future Forum between 2020 and 2022.

Beyond international donor support, CSOs generally continued to have few funding opportunities. Domestic resource mobilization was limited in 2020. Some CSOs, like the Youth Resource Development Program and the Cambodian Volunteers for Society, were able to recruit volunteers to support their core work. In 2020, individuals and private companies led initiatives to raise funds supporting COVID-19 frontline workers and communities affected by the economic impact of the pandemic. For example, in October 2020, Wing (Cambodia) Limited Specialized Bank partnered with Oxfam to support over 3,000 workers and community members affected by COVID-19, according to the *Phnom Penh Post*. Cambodia also has a platform for corporate social responsibility, consisting of representatives from CSOs and the private sector, but details on the platform's activities are not publicly available. Trade unions continued to generate modest revenue through membership fees. Given the devastation of COVID-19, however, some trade unions did not collect membership fees or offered discounted fees to their members in 2020.

The majority of Cambodia's CSOs offer services free of charge for their beneficiaries and most CSOs do not have the human resources capacity or expertise to develop sustainable revenue-generating models to cover the costs of their activities. Some local NGOs, such as Cambodian Living Arts, Phare Ponleu Selpak, and Chab Dai Coalition, previously sold souvenirs or tickets to art performances to generate some revenue, but opportunities for such activities were particularly limited in 2020 due to travel and event restrictions. Social enterprises, like many other businesses, experienced economic shocks in 2020. For instance, Friends the Restaurant, which is operated by Mith Samlanh and Friends International, announced its decision to close all restaurants in April 2020 due to COVID-19. The reliance of social enterprises on foreign tourism for support made them particularly vulnerable in 2020 given the global travel bans.

The financial management systems of most CSOs improved in 2020, primarily due to the government's legal compliance requirements and increasing administrative and reporting requirements from donors. Most CSOs undergo at least an annual budget review and audit conducted by an independent external auditor. However, CSOs at the sub-national level and CBOs still have poor financial management systems, caused by a lack of human resources and limited expertise.

ADVOCACY: 5.1

CSO advocacy deteriorated slightly in 2020. This change was influenced by Cambodia's shrinking civic space, state harassment targeting activists and human rights defenders, and the lack of meaningful platforms to discuss policy and legal frameworks for lobbying.

In 2020, CSOs continued to participate in some formal government cooperation mechanisms, such as the Technical Working Groups (TWGs) on Gender, Planning and Poverty Reduction, Partnership and Harmonization, and Public Administration Reform. Through these entities, CSOs are able to bring their constituencies' concerns to the attention of the government and policymakers. CCC coordinated with its CSO members to gather and provide inputs on the country's progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the National Strategic Development Plan. CSOs also participate in a joint monitoring platform coordinated by UN agencies to monitor Cambodia's development indicators. The degree of CSO influence on policy reforms varies in different TWGs and ministerial committees but depends first and foremost on government approval of CSO involvement in these bodies. The TWG on Gender, for instance, has been particularly promising as the Ministry of Women's Affairs accepted CSOs' comments on the draft Gender Equality Policy and is open to continuing to work with CSOs on the draft policy. Whether or not that evolves into meaningful CSO participation remains to be seen. This degree of influence was not demonstrated in engagements with most other TWGs. However, due to COVID-19, several TWGs and other meetings between CSOs and the government were postponed or cancelled.



CSOs utilize different advocacy strategies, including joining coalitions, negotiating with government representatives, and exchanging perspectives through workshops or public forums. In 2020, CSOs carried out policy advocacy through thematic groups, including the NGO Forum, the CCC, the Health Action Coordinating Committee, the NGO Education Partnership, the NGO Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Solidarity House, the Chab Dai Coalition, Star Kampuchea, the Cambodian NGO Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (NGO CEDAW), and others.

In 2020, NGO CEDAW and its network advocated for women's rights and dignity through gender equality policies such as Cambodia's gender assessment, the first Gender Equality Policy, the National Action Plan to End Violence against Women, and CEDAW. These CSOs mainly conducted meetings, dialogues, and workshops with government agencies both online and offline to lobby and advocate for policy reforms. Several women's empowerment NGOs also submitted a joint statement condemning the draft Law on Public Order released in July 2020, which seeks to regulate citizens' conduct, including their choice of attire, in public spaces. The regulation would likely be disproportionately applied against women and perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

Some CSOs employ a more public approach towards advocacy. In 2020, this was particularly true of CSOs working on labor rights and human rights, including trade unions and workers' associations. Their advocacy approaches included both protests and negotiation with relevant stakeholders to demand fair compensation for workers affected by companies' suspension or closure in 2020. These actions were often met with harassment by private companies and state authorities. In fact, the president of the Cambodian Labor Confederation told Voice of America that "the harassment incidents in 2020 were the worst in the past twenty years." Union activists were dismissed from employment and contracts were suspended, while employers claimed that those dismissals and suspensions were due to the impact of COVID-19. For instance, three trade union activists from Le Meridien Angkor Hotel were fired in July 2020 without proper compensation after they collected thumbprints (in place of signatures) of union members who disagreed with the company's unilateral reduction of staff salaries by 30 percent. This case has not yet been resolved by the Siem Reap Provincial Department of Labor and Vocational Training. Many CSOs remain reluctant to take a hard approach to advocacy, given fears of reprisals and the continuing threat of state harassment.

Advocacy around the COVID-19 crisis was particularly difficult. The Law on National Management in the State of Emergency, signed in April 2020, granted the government sweeping powers to censor anything deemed to incite "panic and chaos." Organizations and news outlets that published information about the impacts of COVID-19, like diasporic media outlet Monoroom.info, were blocked. In March 2020, the head of the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO) was threatened with arrest after criticizing the

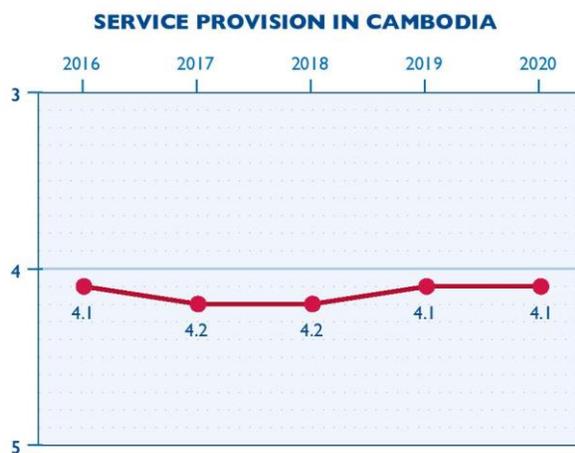
government’s response to the pandemic. A month later, over 300 CSOs, activists, and community groups called for the government to respond to the growing debt crisis that had been exacerbated by COVID-19. In response, the government detained nine community representatives as it sought to determine which organizations had organized the petition. Between the outbreak of COVID-19 in Cambodia and May 2020, it was reported that about forty people had been arrested for Facebook posts about the virus, including four journalists jailed for eighteen months on incitement charges. As a result, local CSOs were extremely cautious when making comments regarding COVID-19, severely limiting their ability to advocate on behalf of constituents struggling under the pandemic’s impact.

The government continues to stifle environmental advocacy in Cambodia. In July 2020, Rong Chhun, the president of the Cambodian Confederation of Unions, was arrested after making a statement on the displacement of farmers on the Cambodia-Vietnam border. In August and September 2020, several others were arrested after calling for his release. Three activists working with the local NGO Mother Nature Cambodia were arrested after making a video about the filling of Boeung Tamok lake. In September, over 1,000 victims of land grabbing marched in front of the Ministry of Land Management, and the Coalition of Cambodian Farmers Community (CCFC) and Equitable Cambodia released a statement asking the government to resolve displacement complaints. Earlier in the year, a settlement was released in response to another CSO complaint on behalf of 1,200 victims of land grabbing in Kampong Speu province, but many saw the resolution as insufficient compared to the land and assets lost by local villagers.

CSOs lobbied policymakers and lawmakers to reform legal and policy frameworks by delivering petitions, attending TWGs, and producing research papers and joint statements. For instance, in August 2020, sixty-five CSOs issued a joint call to discard the draft Law on Public Order, arguing that it would restrict freedoms of expression, association, and assembly.

CSOs continued to advocate for reform of the legal frameworks governing CSOs, including LANGO, LTU, and LOT. CSOs have channeled their advocacy through CSO umbrella organizations such as the NGO Forum and CCC. In February 2020, 100 NGOs and associations signed a joint statement calling for the complete repeal of LANGO. While the government rejected this statement, it remains open to discussion with civil society representatives.

SERVICE PROVISION: 4.1



CSO service provision remained unchanged in 2020. Though some traditional services were disrupted or made impossible by COVID-19 restrictions, CSOs were immediately responsive to the needs of their communities.

The majority of CSOs in Cambodia engage in service delivery. CSOs working in different sectors faced a variety of challenges providing services during the pandemic. As discussed above, CSOs working in more traditional service areas, like health and education, experienced disruption during the pandemic. In early March 2020, schools closed across the nation; many did not re-open until November 2020, only to be shuttered shortly after due to a COVID-19 outbreak. Educational NGOs like KAPE pivoted their programming from

scholarships and teacher trainings to distributing COVID-19 survival kits and assisting schools to record video lessons. Health Action Coordinating Committee (HACC), Cambodia’s local and international health NGO network, was unable to hold member organization meetings due to pandemic restrictions, severely impacting the coordination of health NGOs’ efforts in the face of the pandemic. Khmer HIV/AIDS NGO Alliance (KHANA) was also forced to slow all field activities focused on HIV and tuberculosis education, prevention, and treatment due to COVID-19 restrictions. Trade unions and worker associations remained active, representing and supporting their members affected by COVID-19. Various new civil society programs emerged in 2020 to offer educational services

through digital platforms. For instance, the Asia Foundation and eleven local NGOs partnered with the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) in a national e-reading initiative, #ReadEveryday, which included access to a free digital library.

Only 7 percent of CSOs work on advocacy, human rights, and democracy, and they were frequently targeted by the government with various restrictions, according to CCC's 2020 study. CSOs in the knowledge sector continued to produce new research in 2020, including publications on the economic and short- and long-term effects of COVID-19 and two books on imaginative futures for Cambodia. The Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, the kingdom's oldest think tank, launched a new publication, The Journal of Greater Mekong Studies, to promote multi-stakeholder discussions about critical issues facing the region. In 2020, several new CSOs also provided educational services through digital media platforms. StayHome provided information on COVID-19, while Puthipol provided information on financial literacy. CSOs also expanded work on capacity building for young people in the fields of science and technology. For example, the Tux Global Institute was established in 2020 to offer tuition-free education in technology and engineering.

CSOs continue to strive to reach broader audiences through their work and publications. However, services are mainly offered in the Khmer language, making access difficult for minority groups like the ethnic Vietnamese community that are not fluent in Khmer. Digital and online platforms also may not reach the relatively isolated communities that are the primary home of Cambodia's indigenous and rural populations.

Most of Cambodia's CSOs offer services free of charge for their beneficiaries, with financial support from foreign donors. The public still expects most CSO services to be free and most CSOs lack the capacity to develop sustainable revenue-generating models to cover activity costs.

CSOs garnered mixed responses from the government in 2020 based on their sector and types of services: CSOs offering services in fields like health and education gained recognition from the government, while those working on human rights and democracy were often labeled as opposition groups. For instance, while MoEYS partnered with NGOs to expand digital education resources, the Ministry of Environment threatened the Prey Lang Community Network (PLCN) and Cambodia Human Rights Task Force (CHRTF) with legal action for tracking deforestation, claiming that they were hiding political motives under the guise of environmental monitoring.

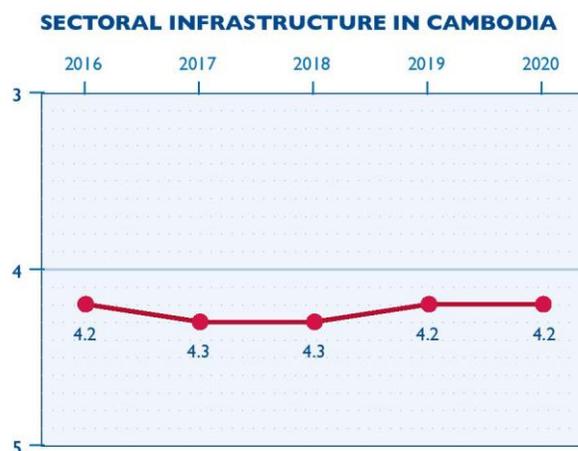
SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE: 4.2

The infrastructure supporting the CSO sector remained unchanged in 2020. This consistency is attributed to continuing collaboration within the sector and ongoing capacity-building support from umbrella NGOs.

Several national and foreign NGOs continued to support capacity building among CSOs in 2020. For instance, the Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (CENTRAL) offered training to trade unions on the labor movement and the legal framework governing labor rights in Cambodia, and CCC offered training for provincial and sub-national CSOs on tax compliance. However, COVID-19 restrictions caused difficulties in sustaining programs with local NGOs.

There are still no dedicated local grant-making organizations that award locally-raised funds to other CSOs, though a few organizations distribute foreign-funded grants. For instance, Oxfam supported a wide variety of national and sub-national CSOs working on agriculture, livelihood, human rights, and social protection, maintaining a strong focus on "unheard voices" and the most marginalized segments of the Cambodian population. Grants through the Asia Foundation allowed the Hapswell Foundation and KAPE to fund more education scholarships for young women from impoverished areas.

Though the challenges presented by COVID-19 limited opportunities to build new coalitions in 2020, CSOs continued to form coalitions and umbrella networks to carry out advocacy programs, as discussed above. The

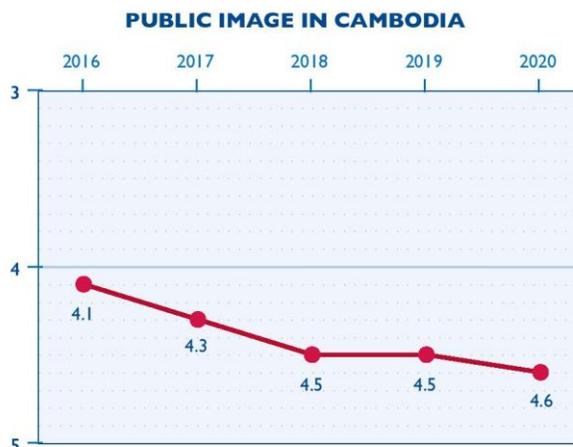


effectiveness of those networks depended on their sectors and the government ministerial committees with which they engaged. Coalitions and networks working on service delivery had greater space to engage and influence policy, while coalitions working on human rights and democracy were less successful in achieving their desired outcomes.

As everything shifted to virtual platforms under the pandemic, CSOs with sufficient technological and language abilities were able to attend more free online trainings, but smaller CSOs with limited technology or English fluency faced difficulties in pursuing capacity-building opportunities. A few institutions, such as the capacity-building NGOs VBNK, CCC, and the NGO Forum, continued to offer training opportunities to CSOs. Some foreign NGOs also offered capacity-building services to local partners. The Solidarity Center, for example, provided training on workers' rights and the labor movement to its trade union partners in Phnom Penh and other provinces. International digital education platforms, such as Edx and Coursera, also offer CSO-related courses on topics such as project management, results-based management, monitoring and evaluation, grant writing, and crowdfunding. As a result of limited ICT capacity, most trade unions and workers' associations did not conduct meetings or training in 2020.

Limited collaboration and intersectoral mistrust remained challenges for CSOs in 2020, according to CCC's CSO Road Map 2020–2025. While CSOs in the knowledge and education sectors were able to collaborate on research about COVID-19's impact and efforts to transition to digital learning, other CSOs saw a drop in collaboration due to the lack of in-person networking.

PUBLIC IMAGE: 4.6



The public image of CSOs deteriorated slightly in 2020. Although CSOs increasingly engaged on social media, public skepticism of CSO work grew and was exacerbated by continued lack of media coverage and limited recognition of CSOs working on human rights and democracy.

Media coverage remained limited in 2020, but CSOs working on issues related to COVID-19 received some media attention. Social media personalities also played an active role in awareness-raising and providing information to the public in 2020, tackling issues like reproductive health, plastic usage, and climate change. Several female media figures, such as Green Lady Cambodia and Breakthrough, also used social media to raise awareness of women's rights, washable sanitary pads, and feminine

hygiene.

The public was increasingly skeptical about CSO activities in 2020. In the wake of COVID-19, CSOs were seen as less reliable by the public because some CSOs did not have the capacity to meet all of their constituencies' needs. That lack of capacity and challenges presented by COVID-19 undermined CSO credibility. This decrease in trust was compounded by the continuing patron-client nature of Cambodian politics. Particularly in the realm of human rights and advocacy, there is a public misattribution of CSO activities as either "activities of a color revolution" or "activities at the behest of the state." Since the 2018 crackdown, people fear that if they support CSOs, they will inadvertently become targets of the government. CBOs, however, are more positively perceived because the public has a clearer sense of the services they provide.

CSOs working to deliver services complementing those of the state—including education, health, social protection, and the knowledge sector—are welcomed by authorities at all levels. The government is open to working with some of those CSOs and has integrated these organizations into various TWGs, particularly if they aligned with SDG target areas. However, government officials continue to view other CSOs, especially those focused on human rights, as being aligned with former opposition party members and practices, and thereby view them as a challenge to their rule and stability. The private sector continues to be wary of partnering with or making public statements regarding CSOs as they are focused on preserving a neutral image.

CSOs increased their visibility on social media in 2020 as many turned to digital alternatives in response to pandemic restrictions on in-person events. Increasing visibility on social media platforms included sharing updates, hosting live conversations through Facebook, and conducting online awareness-raising programs. Most CSOs have created social media profiles to update their constituencies on project implementation and communicate their work to the public. Facebook remains the most popular online platform and is nearly ubiquitous in Cambodia.

Only a few CSOs issue annual reports. Although most NGOs are required to submit annual reports to MoI, few make them publicly available. The NGO Governance and Professional Practice (GPP) guidelines, introduced by CCC in 2004, continue to promote good governance and accountability in the sector.

Disclaimer: *The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or FHI 360.*

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