



# 2021 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

CAMBODIA  
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# 2021 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

For Cambodia

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# LOCAL PARTNER

## FUTURE FORUM

Samnang Lor  
Dr. Michael Renfrew

# PROJECT MANAGERS

## FHI 360

Michael Kott  
Eka Imerlishvili  
Alex Nejadian  
William Daley

## INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR NOT-FOR-PROFIT LAW (ICNL)

Kate Musgrave  
Jennifer Stuart

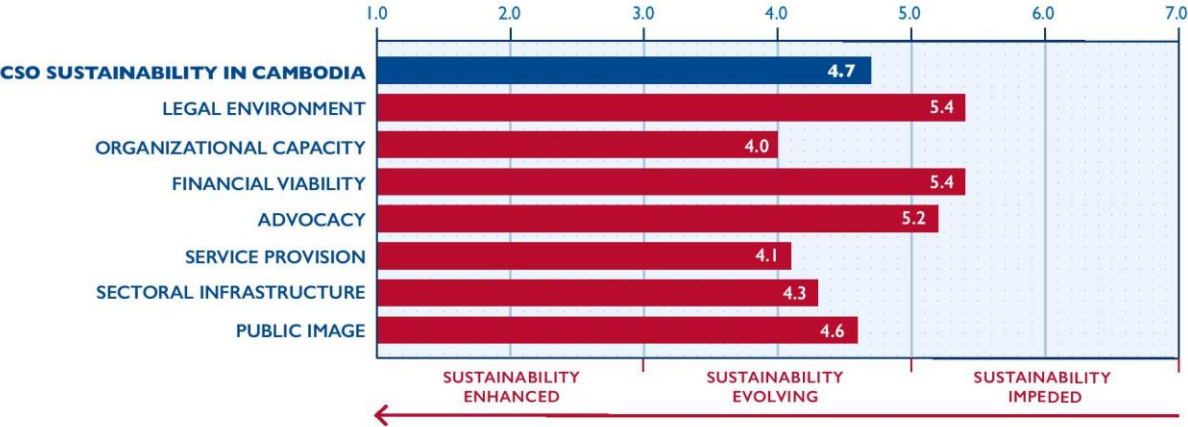
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# CAMBODIA

**Capital:** Phnom Penh  
**Population:** 16,713,015  
**GDP per capita (PPP):** \$4,200  
**Human Development Index:** Medium (0.593)  
**Freedom in the World:** Not Free (24/100)

## OVERALL CSO SUSTAINABILITY: 4.7



The political environment in Cambodia remained tense in 2021. Although several political parties are active in the country, the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) has continued to consolidate power. In 2017, the Supreme Court dissolved the primary opposition party, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), for alleged plans to overthrow the government, sparking international condemnation and making even semi-competitive elections impossible.

Cambodia was again classified as “not free” by Freedom House in 2021. Freedom of expression remains particularly at risk as the ruling party cracked down on topics it considered sensitive, such as land rights, political representation, and criticism of the government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Lawsuits, criminal prosecutions, and tax regulations were frequently employed to silence detractors. The government crackdown on independent media, begun with the closing of *Cambodia Daily* in 2017, continued to cause concern in 2021 when the state announced the creation of a new fifteen-member Monitoring Committee for Journalism Ethics. The committee is composed primarily of government officials and is charged with monitoring and evaluating the “ethical conduct” of journalists and media outlets. Journalists and media rights NGOs warn that the committee could allow the government to more heavily restrict independent media coverage and harass journalists. Freedom of expression faces further threat from the impending activation of a national internet firewall, which will require that all internet traffic be routed through a single, government-controlled chokepoint.

The COVID-19 health crisis remained a major disruption to daily life and civil society operations in 2021. At the start of the year, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that Cambodia had only experienced 382 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and no deaths. However, cases spiked beginning in late February 2021, sparking a third wave of the virus dubbed the “February 20 community event.” By the end of 2021, a total of 120,464 cases and 3,009 deaths were confirmed.

To mitigate the effects of the pandemic, the government continued to impose several COVID-19 restrictions in 2021. The Law on National Management in the State of Emergency, signed in April 2020, provided the government with sweeping powers over the media and the ability to ban or limit foreign and domestic travel, gatherings, and professional activities. The law also enabled the government to seize property and mobilize or displace populations as needed, 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. Though it has not yet been invoked, the risk of abuse and misapplication of the law remained a real concern for civil society. In March 2021, the Law on Measures to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 formally ratified government powers related to the pandemic, including the ability to “ban or restrict any gathering or demonstration” in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Lockdown orders in Phnom Penh were extended from April to October 2021, and government authorities strictly enforced restrictions on movement in select COVID-19 “red zones” in the city. Police reportedly enforced

the zones using violence, including instances of caning violators, and the Ministry of Information ordered journalists to halt reporting from the areas.

The health crisis also continued to negatively impact the economy in 2021. Prior to the pandemic, Cambodia's gross domestic product (GDP) had an average annual growth rate of 7.1 percent; in 2021, the growth rate dropped to 2.2 percent. This decline was primarily due to the strain on key industries like tourism, garments, and footwear. According to the World Bank's December 2021 economic report, the travel and tourism sector in the country had virtually collapsed, along with the livelihoods of many of the 2 million workers employed in the sector. The disruption was partially offset by the government's cash transfer program, launched in June 2020 and extended to December 2021. By October 2021, 19 percent of all households in Cambodia had received a cash transfer through the program.

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. Cambodia improved slightly in Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perception Index (CPI), receiving a score of 23 out of 100 compared to 21 the previous year, and ranking 157 out of 180 countries. In the 2021 Economic Freedom Index, Cambodia ranked 106 out of 186 countries, a slight improvement since 2020.

The overall sustainability of the CSO sector in Cambodia did not change notably in 2021. Though legal environment, financial viability, advocacy, and sectoral infrastructure all registered slight deteriorations in 2021, organizational capacity recorded a slight improvement, while service provision and public image remained unchanged. Deteriorations in the space were primarily spurred by ongoing government restrictions and harassment, both in response to COVID-19 and more broadly, and decreasing available funds. At the same time, however, CSOs improved their adaptability and were able to better retain staff in 2021. While the public rewarded their work in the midst of the health crisis with greater trust and understanding, media coverage of CSO contributions remained limited.

Most CSOs focused on service delivery in 2021. A small number of organizations continued to work on human rights, democracy, and the environment, and donors continued to support CSOs working in the health, education, social protection, gender, human rights, democracy, environment, and knowledge sectors. Information on sub-national CSOs remains limited, but restrictions on movement during lockdowns resulted in reports of suspended activities.

April 2019 figures remain the latest estimates of NGO registration. At that time, the Phnom Penh governor reported that there were approximately 5,523 local NGOs registered with the Ministry of Interior (MOI) and 419 international NGOs with signed memorandums of understanding with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MOFA). In addition to associations and NGOs, there are thousands of community-based organizations (CBOs), communities, and networks, which are largely unregistered and informal.

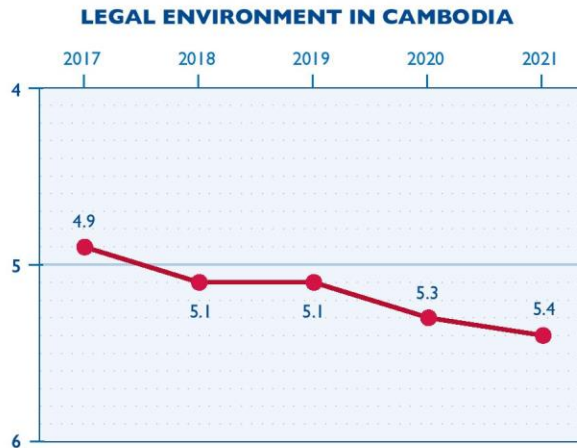
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## LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 5.4

The legal environment governing CSOs deteriorated slightly in 2021 as newly adopted laws further threatened civil and political rights.

In 2021, 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, and the broader criminal codes.

LANGO, the most constricting of those laws, 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 where it plans to operate, and both the director and chief of finance of a local CSO must be Cambodian citizens. An international CSO must register by entering into a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with MOFA, then signing a project agreement with MOFA before it can begin work. MOUs are valid for three years and must be renewed prior to their expiration. LANGO still 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, Article 24 of LANGO specifically calls for "neutrality towards political parties." Politikoffee, a discourse



network, was unable to register for NGO status in 2021 because local authorities remained wary about its mission to discuss politics.

The threats inherent in the Law on National Management in the State of Emergency, though it had not yet been invoked, continued to constrain CSO operations and daily life in 2021, while several newly adopted laws built upon these concerns and curtailed rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association. In March, the government adopted the new COVID-19 Law on Measures to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 and other Serious, Dangerous and Contagious Diseases, providing for up to twenty-year prison sentences for violations of COVID-19 measures. According to Human Rights Watch, within two months of its adoption, over 100

people had been charged with violating the law.

In February, the government issued a sub-decree on the Establishment of the National Internet Gateway, which will allow it to monitor all internet activities and grant the authorities broad powers to block internet connections. Though the government claims the move will help tackle cybercrime, activists warn that it is designed primarily to crack down on free speech. The gateway was expected to begin operating in early 2022, but given the government's lack of technical capacity, implementation remains delayed.

Cambodia's Law on Telecommunications, in force since December 2015, established the Telecommunication Regulator of Cambodia and granted it extensive control over telecommunication information and data. While the law was allegedly passed to address cybercrime, fraud, and other forms of online abuse, human rights groups continued to express concern that it is a pretext for gathering private online data and stifling political activism. This concern has been enhanced by the prospective National Internet Gateway.

Dissent was further discouraged in December 2021 when the government issued a *prakas* (proclamation) forbidding monks to take part in labor strikes and political protests. Though the full impact of this was not yet visible in 2021, the move threatens to delegitimize such protests by forbidding what had previously been vocal support from religious leaders.

Cambodia's authorities continued to interfere with CSO operations and threaten and harass activists in 2021. According to the Cambodian Center for Human Rights' Fundamental Freedoms Monitor Project (FFMP), more than 300 restrictions and violations of fundamental freedoms occurred across Cambodia in 2021; 77 percent of these incidents impeded upon lawful online expression.

In August, trade union leader Rong Chhun (who was arrested in July 2020) and two political opposition members were convicted of incitement for comments on community land loss. They will spend between twenty months and two years in prison and face large fines. Environmental activists faced similar treatment. In May, five Mother Nature Cambodia (MNC) activists were convicted of incitement and sentenced to eighteen to twenty months in prison. The activists had raised concerns over the filling-in of a lake in Phnom Penh and its expected negative environmental impacts. In July, the authorities imposed additional charges of conspiracy against three of the activists.

In another blow to political freedom, in 2021, Cambodia's courts held a series of mass trials of over one hundred political opposition members and dozens of human rights defenders for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. According to Human Rights Watch, over sixty political prisoners were still behind bars at the end of the year.

There were no notable changes to CSO taxation in 2021. The Taxation Law provides CSOs with income tax exemptions, and a *prakas* issued by the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MOEF) in April 2018 clarified that such tax exemptions apply only to income exclusively received for religious, charitable, scientific, literary, or educational purposes that have been approved by the ministry. CSOs remained concerned about the costs of compliance and worry about the low level of understanding of taxation requirements at provincial and sub-national levels.

CSOs are not subject to any legal restrictions on their ability to seek funding from a diverse range of sources, including international donations and social enterprise models. However, those CSOs with objectives that do not necessarily align with government policies frequently experience harassment and legal pressure, as described above, which can in turn dissuade some donors from partnering with or supporting them.

Local legal capacity slightly improved in 2021, and several organizations were able to provide CSOs with legal consultations and support. These included, for instance, the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC), Legal Aid Cambodia (LAC), the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO), Transparency International (TI) Cambodia, and members of the Bar Association of the Kingdom of Cambodia (BAKC).

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## ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: 4.0

Organizational capacity in the CSO sector improved slightly in 2021. Though the political environment continued to pose impediments to normal operations, CSOs were able to adapt to the “new normal” under COVID-19 and strengthen their strategic planning and technical capacities. As many organizations continued to shift priorities toward service provision in response to the health crisis, they demonstrated resilience in the face of financial and personnel limitations.

In January and early February, travel across the kingdom was largely unrestricted and organizations were able to offer support, get feedback, and engage with projects at the community level. As pandemic restrictions and lockdowns increased in late February, however, CSOs encountered a variety of challenges to their operations and efforts to build constituencies. Organizations working in traditional service delivery areas such as health, education, and livelihood were most directly impacted by the pandemic restrictions and lockdowns. Those CSOs were forced to alter their activities in order to adhere to the government's safety guidelines, resulting in the mass adoption of digital platforms for meetings and knowledge dissemination activities. In many cases, this digital adaptation enabled CSOs to strengthen ties with their constituencies.

Women's advocacy organizations such as Klahaan adopted a greater degree of digital advocacy and continued to focus their research in 2021 on the pandemic's impact on women. In the process, they were able to expand their constituencies, particularly among younger audiences online. NGOs in the education field shifted toward helping teachers and students to bridge the digital divide as schooling moved online for the majority of the year. Organizations in the knowledge sector were able to expand their operations in 2021 due to available funding for pandemic-related research and policy recommendations.

In 2021, the majority of registered CSOs operating at the national or international level had strategic plans, but planning at the grassroots level remained limited to immediate project scope. As in previous years, CSOs faced challenges implementing their strategic plans. CSOs' goals and missions continue to be heavily influenced by donor priorities, given their dependence on donor funding, and programs focus on generating outputs, often with a diluted focus on longer-term impact and sustainable outcomes.

LANGO mandates that CSOs develop formal management structures, including boards of directors to provide strategic and financial oversight and organizational regulations for human resource management and other issues. National CSOs must notify MOI if they have a change in executive director, finance director, or a member of the board of directors. In 2021, many CSO boards were more actively engaged than in previous years, given the need for additional strategic guidance to navigate the challenges during the year. Still, according to CCC's CSO Road Map 2020–2025, CSOs under the CCC umbrella continue to face notable limitations in collaboration, capacity, management succession planning, and ownership.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY IN CAMBODIA



Across the sector, CSOs faced fewer problems retaining qualified staff in 2021, largely due to limitations elsewhere: previously, staff were often lost to the more competitive benefits and salaries available in the private sector, but the uncertainty of the pandemic limited the number of alternative position openings. CSOs receiving foreign support—typically those that operate at the national or international levels—also generally retained sufficient human resources and financial management capacity. Regardless, the increased need for CSO services continued to place pressure on limited staff resources and capacity. Pandemic travel restrictions limited CSOs’ ability to engage international volunteers in the field, while the level of local volunteers remained unchanged compared to previous years.

Both domestic and international CSOs, especially those based in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, had access to dependable internet and good information communication technology (ICT) equipment, and they increasingly used social media for outreach. However, while many organizations have vastly improved their technical proficiency since the onset of the pandemic, technical capacity remains uneven across the sector due to constraints around internet access, staff skills, and access to adequate ICT equipment.

## FINANCIAL VIABILITY: 5.4



Financial viability deteriorated slightly in 2021 and continues to be one of the weakest dimensions of CSO sustainability in Cambodia. CSOs primarily have access to short-term funding sources and very few organizations have any degree of financial sustainability. Donor funding continued to shift toward pandemic relief and away from traditional programming, and CSOs struggled to access financial support and usual fundraising opportunities due to travel restrictions and the shift to online work.

Even where funding does exist, the sustainability of that funding is an ever-present issue. According to CCC’s CSO Road Map 2020–2025, in 2020, 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 remained heavily dependent on international donor support, both to operate (particularly for overhead costs) and to implement programs. Key foreign donors in 2021 included the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the Open Society Foundation (OSF). In addition to these and the European Union (EU), Cambodian CSOs also received support from bilateral donors like the United States, Japan, Australia, and, increasingly, China.

In 2021, the pool of donor funding continued to increase, in large part due to the development community’s continued support for activities to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. For instance, Australia pledged \$50 million to support Cambodian vulnerable populations, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) launched an economic and social impact assessment to support post-COVID-19 development. CSOs in the knowledge sector, including the Asian Vision Institute, Cambodian Development Research Institute, and Future Forum, also benefited from an increase in foreign funding opportunities focused on strengthening CSO capacity, developing public policy analysis, and strengthening collaboration between CSOs, the government, and the private sector. For instance, in December, The Asia Foundation’s Ponlok Chomnes program supported a National Policy Forum on Cambodia’s COVID-19 Recovery Pathways, providing a platform for CSOs and government officials to exchange research findings and recommendations.

However, the pool of organizations receiving foreign funding also continued to narrow, given CSOs’ various capacities in grant writing, financial reporting, monitoring and evaluation, and report writing. CSOs at the village and district levels particularly lack the necessary financial and human resources to successfully procure such funding. CSOs also reported more difficulties in receiving foreign funding in 2021 due to bureaucratic hurdles. Articles 25 and 27 of LANGO place burdensome reporting requirements on CSOs that receive foreign funding



and respondents to a 2021 FFMP survey reported that banks required excessive details, all of which presented obstacles to CSOs with already-constrained capacities.

Domestic funding to support CSO operations remains scarce and public fundraising campaigns are rare. In 2021, CSOs received some local support through digital platforms for banking and ride sharing, through which donations could be made to CSO partners in the system, but it is unclear how much support the platforms generated. Some CSOs also receive funding through diaspora and individual donations but these are limited. CSOs do not generally collect membership fees.

Some CSOs continued to develop potential revenue-generating streams through social enterprises. For example, the youth empowerment organization Friends International utilizes a social enterprise model in which it runs cafes to generate revenue for its training and support programs for at-risk Cambodian youth. However, with the rise of COVID-19 cases in 2021, such venues were temporarily closed. At the same time, social enterprises' usual reliance on foreign tourism for support continued to be hampered by global travel bans.

Generally, attempts to diversify revenue streams risk overstretching operations that can no longer deliver their intended outputs, and these sources of funding remain limited and insufficient. Burdensome disclosure requirements also threaten CSOs with potentially heavy taxation as a result of non-traditional revenue streams.

Nearly all CSOs have a financial officer. In line with domestic income and taxation laws, as well as international donor requirements where applicable, most CSOs undergo at least an annual budget review and audit conducted by an independent external auditor.

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## ADVOCACY: 5.2

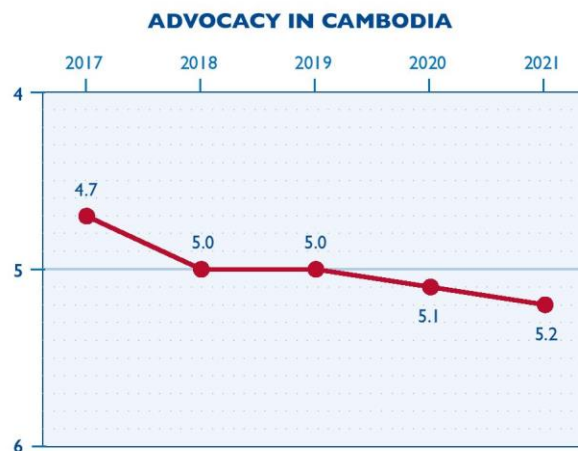
CSO advocacy deteriorated slightly in 2021, heavily impacted by Cambodia's limited civic space, state harassment of activists and resulting self-censorship, and an absence of legal frameworks for lobbying. Advocacy in the fields of environment, human rights, labor rights, and political representation are particularly off limits.

High-profile cases, such as the mass trial of former CNRP party members and the detention of environmental activists, have added to CSOs' reluctance to express their opinions. Human rights organizations and networks such as LICADHO continue to advocate for the release of jailed human rights defenders and political prisoners, while remaining some of the few public voices of opposition. Media outlets operating within the kingdom also primarily avoid direct criticism,

leaving international outlets like Voice of America and The Diplomat to lead critical reflection. A 2021 report by CCC found that safety and security have become high priority concerns for most CSO staff, due to both the threat of COVID-19 and pandemic restrictions and the weight of new laws and regulations.

According to a survey by FFMP, just 53 percent of CSO and trade union leaders reported feeling "very free" or "somewhat free" to express themselves, down from 61 percent in 2020. This was the lowest level yet, showing continued declines from 74 percent in 2016. At the same time, 84 percent of CSO and trade union leaders reported regularly self-censoring. Overall, just 42 percent of individuals polled feel free to speak in public, and just 47 percent feel free to speak on social media. This trend shows that the space for free speech in Cambodia is shrinking, as evidenced by the repressive tactics the government used in 2021 to target and silence dissenting speech.

The Law on National Management in the State of Emergency granted the government sweeping powers to censor anything deemed to incite "panic and chaos," banned independent reporting from "red zones," and required organizations and news outlets that published information about the impacts of COVID-19 to keep commentary in line with government policies. In September, seven former CNRP party members were sentenced to eighteen months in prison for social media posts criticizing the government leadership in response to the pandemic.



Regardless of the threat of censorship, in April 2021, LICADHO released a statement to remind government policymakers that, while lockdown measures were important to curb the spread of the virus, burdensome restrictions have social consequences, as evidenced in a rise in gender-based violence.

Despite this challenging environment, CSOs utilized a variety of advocacy strategies, including coalitions, workshops, public forums, and digital campaigns. In 2021, CSOs continued to carry out policy advocacy through thematic groups, including the NGO Forum, CCC, the Health Action Coordinating Committee, the NGO Education Partnership, the NGO Committee on the Rights of the Child, 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. Klahaan, a women’s empowerment research organization, undertook digital campaigning for women’s rights around sexual health and reproductive rights. In the same arena, the Health Action Coordinating Committee held a forum on adolescent sexual and reproductive health, seeking to bridge the gaps between decision makers, activists, service providers, and adolescents.

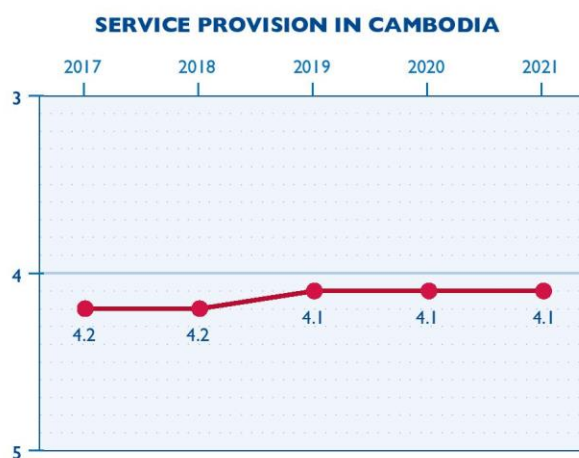
In 2021, CSOs continued to participate in some formal government cooperation mechanisms, such as the Technical Working Groups (TWGs); the Joint Monitoring Indicator (JMI) for development effectiveness; the Implementation of Social Accountability Framework (ISAF) to improve public services at subnational levels; and other spaces through the National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) and the Cambodian Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For instance, in 2021, CSOs participated in online and in-person TWG sessions on mine actions, food security and nutrition, and gender-based violence. However, it remains a challenge to turn their inputs into actionable policy.

Funding from The Asia Foundation’s Ponlok Chomnes program contributed additional avenues for advocacy through policy cooperation between the knowledge sector and ministerial colleagues. These platforms provide CSOs the opportunity to participate in discussions of policy issues with decision-makers. However, the majority of organizations that participate in these mechanisms are either international CSOs providing technical support or knowledge sector CSOs that can provide data with a Cambodia-centric perspective, excluding large swathes of the CSO community.

CSOs also persisted in a number of policy advocacy initiatives in 2021, and in February, for instance, sixty-two CSOs signed a joint statement calling for the complete repeal of the National Internet Gateway. Despite the ongoing campaign, the firewall is still slated for implementation in 2022.

CSO umbrella organizations like the NGO Forum and CCC continued to provide platforms for advocacy, and through them, CSOs continued to advocate for reform of the legal frameworks governing CSOs, including LANGO.

## SERVICE PROVISION: 4.1



CSO service provision remained unchanged in 2021. While some traditional services continued to be disrupted by COVID-19 restrictions, CSOs were responsive and flexible in meeting the needs of their constituencies.

The majority of CSOs in Cambodia engage in service delivery rather than advocacy, and those working in different sectors faced a variety of challenges due to pandemic restrictions. For example, Youth Star Cambodia, a youth- and education-focused volunteering organization, was unable to place new volunteers in its project communities between April and October 2021 due to pandemic restrictions. Recognizing the ongoing and urgent need, however, the organization was able to extend the commitments of volunteers already in the

field to ensure ongoing support. Given the increased threat of COVID-19 compared to the previous year, in 2021, CSOs also increasingly adapted their portfolios, including through distribution of materials, adding health

components to their existing programs, producing research papers, and increasingly reaching and supporting their constituents through online methods.

Cambodian CSOs also provide services in the fields of public health, female reproductive rights, and social protection. In 2021, CSOs including Sahmakun Teang Tnaut (STT), LICADHO, and the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) also continued to work on more sensitive areas such as land rights, advocacy, and human rights. In more traditional development spaces, organizations such as Youth Star Cambodia provided youth volunteering opportunities in under-served communities to identify and reintegrate out-of-school children. Organizations like Energy Lab continued to build on dialogue toward sustainable energy alternatives, including initiatives like the Clean Energy Week series and the Electric Mobility Showcase.

Operations and platforms for discussion in the knowledge sector were also improved by additional funding opportunities and the rise of online discussions in 2021. Organizations such as Future Forum and the Center for Khmer Studies were able to increase outputs like research reports and publications, expand training programs into new research areas, and increase participation in events.

CSOs continue to ensure that their goods and services meet local demands through largely informal needs assessments and based on their local knowledge. CSOs also continue to strive to reach broader audiences through their work and publications, and in 2021 particularly recognized the need to better engage with rural and isolated communities, which remained a challenge. As in previous years, services were primarily offered in the Khmer language, making access difficult for minority groups like the ethnic Vietnamese community.

The majority of CSOs provide services free of charge, with financial support from their donors. The public continues to expect such services to be free and, if anything, that view has been solidified by the additional support received through COVID-specific interventions, such as the distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE). Most CSOs do not have the staff capacity or expertise to develop sustainable revenue-generating models that cover the costs of their community activities, nor do they have a mindset to consider doing so.

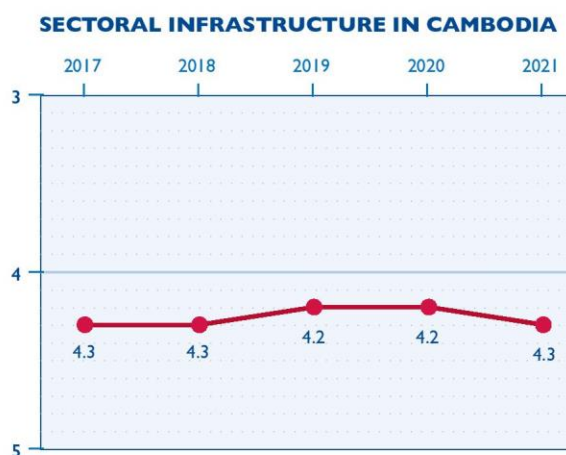
CSOs garnered mixed responses from government representatives based on focus areas. Those providing services in areas like health and education continued to gain recognition from the government as agents of positive development. However, those working in land rights, for example, were frequently labelled as destructive, opposition-aligned groups.

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## SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE: 4.3

The infrastructure supporting the CSO sector deteriorated slightly in 2021. This was primarily due to the impact of COVID-19 closures and the subsequent reprioritization of activities toward short-term needs and away from long-term collaborative planning in the sector. In particular, CSOs were increasingly in competition for funding, while donors demanded high levels of technical capacity, originality, and inter-sectoral collaboration.

Organizations like The Asia Foundation, the East-West Management Institute, and the Asian Vision Institute continued to provide training and technical support to other CSOs. Training previously focused on areas such as digital innovation, monitoring and evaluation, and strategic planning, but in 2021 additionally incorporated best practices around COVID-19 resilience. For example, The Asia Foundation offered support on transitioning to digital operations. Also in 2021, CCC implemented the second phase of a project to improve accountability practices, highlighting the twelve commitments of the Global Standard for CSO Accountability. With funding support from Global Standard, nine local NGOs and one international NGO operating in Cambodia participated in the initiative.



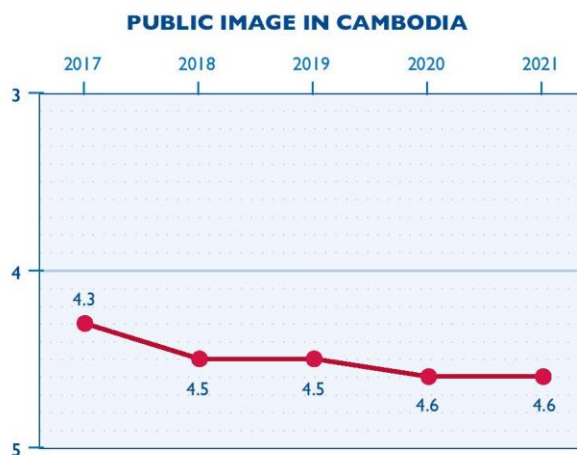
Networks such as Politikoffee also organized training and dialogue workshops for other CSOs and their members. CCC provided some training opportunities on governance and advocacy issues and offered training for provincial and sub-national CSOs on tax compliance. Also in 2021, the Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (CENTRAL) continued to offer training to trade unions on the labor movement and the legal framework governing labor rights. Due to lockdown restrictions, the majority of training sessions conducted in 2021 took place online, enabling greater accessibility to those who had sufficient technology and internet access while continuing to present difficulties to smaller CSOs with limited technology.

There are still no dedicated local grantmaking organizations that award locally raised funds to other CSOs, though a few organizations distribute foreign-funded grants. TI, for example, regranted EU funding to support local CSOs.

Despite competition for funding and limited capacity for long-term collaboration and planning, some CSOs formed coalitions and umbrella networks to carry out advocacy programs where possible. For instance, Future Forum worked with Angkor Research and Consulting to provide public policy and data analysis training to the MOEF team working on COVID-19 recovery. The effectiveness of such CSO collaborations depended on their sectors and the government ministerial committees with which they engaged: coalitions and networks working on social service areas had greater space to engage and influence policy, while coalitions working on human rights and democracy were less successful in achieving their desired outcomes.

Partnerships between CSOs and other sectors remained consistent in 2021. Future Forum continued to collaborate with regional and national news outlets to publish its policy commentaries, and Energy Lab enhanced its relationships with private sector organizations such as Voltra (a maker of electric vehicles) in order to showcase the benefit of environmental consciousness. Pandemic restrictions, however, limited organic opportunities for organizations to meet and develop relationships with actors in other sectors.

## PUBLIC IMAGE: 4.6



The public image of CSOs remained relatively unchanged in 2021. Though traditional media coverage of CSOs’ non-COVID activities remains limited, organizations increasingly used social media to boost awareness of their work and activities.

Media coverage of CSO activities continued to be limited primarily to large international day events, including UN-backed celebrations like International Volunteer Day and International Youth Day. In 2021, some international media outlets, including the Southeast Asia Globe and Voice of America, increased their coverage of CSO activities and engagements, and the Globe provided a free platform for content from CSO partners such as Future Forum, TI, and Aide et Action. This offered CSOs the opportunity to expand awareness of their work,

though readership is limited to English-speaking audiences. Local outlets remained primarily focused on reporting on events, and rarely covered CSO services and activities.

The public was less skeptical of CSO activities in 2021, in large part due to the increasing visibility of CSO operations in response to COVID-19—which had both better adapted to the public’s most urgent needs in 2021 and garnered greater attention through online outreach and engagement. There do, however, remain concerns around the continuing patron-client nature of Cambodian politics. Particularly in the realm of human rights and advocacy, members of the public sometimes misattribute CSO activities as either “activities of a color revolution” or “activities at the behest of the state,” and people continue to fear that supporting CSOs may be perceived as criticizing the ruling party.

The government continued to view CSOs operating in areas such as education and health positively, as evidenced, for instance, by the ongoing partnership between the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport and numerous CSOs through the Cambodian Consortium for Out of School Children. However, CSOs working on citizen rights,

political participation, and environmental protection were more likely to face harassment and were seen as destabilizing peace and unity in the country.

CSOs continued to improve their outreach and visibility on social media in 2021, especially as operations increasingly turned to digital alternatives in response to pandemic restrictions. Initiatives such as the partnerships with the Globe, mentioned above, also highlighted CSOs' growing capacity to raise awareness about their activities. Social media influencers continued to play an active role in CSO awareness-raising in 2021. Through platforms like TikTok and Facebook, they tackled issues relating to the environment, culture, and health.

Few CSOs issue annual reports. Though the majority of national and international CSOs operating in Cambodia are required to submit annual reports to MOI, they rarely make them publicly available. CSOs at the grassroots level often lack the capacity to regularly produce such reports. The NGO Governance and Professional Practice (GPP) guidelines, introduced by CCC in 2004, continued 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.*

**U.S. Agency for International Development**

1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20523

Tel: (202) 712-0000

Fax: (202) 216-3524

[www.usaid.gov](http://www.usaid.gov)