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Dr. Hor Peng & Dr. Phim Runsinarith

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REMARKS FROM EDITORS

The NUM Research Series, Special Policy Edition January 2025, represents a significant milestone in our continued effort to foster research excellence and address Cambodia's most pressing challenges. This volume, featuring a diverse collection of studies, provides fresh perspectives and actionable insights across a range of critical issues, including affordable housing, sustainable development, urban planning, and socio-economic resilience.

This special edition is evidence of the commitment of the National University of Management to advance knowledge and promote sustainable, inclusive solutions for the benefit of society. The contributions within this volume underscore the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, bringing together academics, practitioners, policymakers, and stakeholders to address shared challenges with innovative and practical approaches.

As editors, we are particularly proud of how this research bridges the gap between theory and practice. Whether exploring the impacts of land reforms, the challenges of affordable housing in coastal provinces, or Cambodia's alignment with global development frameworks, these studies highlight the transformative power of evidence-based research in informing policy and guiding implementation.

This edition would not have been possible without the dedication and expertise of our contributors, who have worked tirelessly to ensure the quality and relevance of the research presented here. We are equally indebted to the NUM leadership, faculty, and research staff for their support, as well as our institutional and international partners who have provided invaluable resources and collaboration.

It is our hope that this volume will not only serve as a resource for scholars and policymakers but also inspire further research and innovation in tackling Cambodia's development challenges. We invite readers to engage with these findings and contribute to the ongoing dialogue on sustainable and equitable growth in Cambodia.

Finally, we extend our deepest gratitude to everyone who made this publication possible. Together, we strive to empower our communities through knowledge, collaboration, and a shared commitment to progress.

Dr. Hor Peng

Rector, National University of Management

Dr. Phim Runsinarith

Editor-in-Chief, NUM Research Series

Phnom Penh, January 2025

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Affordable Housing in Cambodia’s Coastal Provinces: Stakeholder Perspectives, Challenges, and Pathways to Sustainable Solutions

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Executive Summary

The qualitative study on affordable housing in Cambodia’s coastal provinces—Koh Kong, Sihanoukville, Kampot, and Kep—highlights critical challenges and opportunities in addressing housing accessibility and affordability. The findings are structured around market dynamics, barriers to housing development, stakeholder roles, and actionable recommendations for sustainable solutions.

The housing markets in these provinces reflect unique characteristics shaped by economic activities, migration, and regional development patterns. Koh Kong faces significant demand for affordable rental housing from SEZ workers but is constrained by high construction costs and inadequate infrastructure. Sihanoukville’s market is heavily influenced by foreign investments and industrial expansion, leading to high land prices and inadequate affordable housing for local workers. Kampot, with its scenic appeal, struggles with speculative land practices and housing affordability for vulnerable groups like fishermen. Kep, primarily a leisure destination, shows minimal focus on affordable housing for locals and a nascent real estate market catering to outsiders.

Key barriers include land and regulatory challenges, such as zoning issues and speculative practices, financial constraints like limited mortgage accessibility for low-income households, and socio-environmental factors, including climate risks and community resistance to relocation. These issues are exacerbated by fragmented stakeholder collaboration and limited enforcement of housing policies.

Note: This policy research paper is the collaboration between the Ministry of land Management Urban Planning and Construction & National University of Management

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Stakeholders play distinct roles in addressing these challenges. Developers prioritize high-margin projects but face difficulties in balancing affordability and quality. Government officials implement housing policies but are constrained by limited resources and weak enforcement mechanisms. NGOs contribute significantly to slum upgrading and community housing but operate with resource limitations. Banks offer financial products but largely exclude informal workers and low-income groups, highlighting the need for innovative financing solutions.

Emerging themes emphasize the importance of public-private partnerships (PPPs), innovative financing models, and regulatory reforms to address housing barriers effectively. Integrating climate resilience into housing projects and ensuring affordability for future generations are critical for sustainable development.

The recommendations propose strengthening zoning laws, introducing developer incentives, expanding financial products, and fostering stakeholder collaboration. Capacity-building programs for local authorities and climate-resilient housing designs are essential to ensure long-term sustainability. By implementing these solutions, Cambodia's coastal provinces can address housing affordability challenges, promote equitable growth, and improve living standards for their most vulnerable populations.

1. Introduction

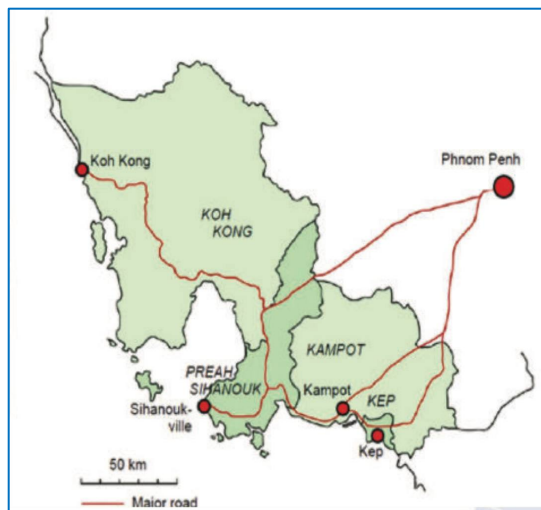
1.1 Background

The challenges of affordable housing in Cambodia's coastal regions have become increasingly pressing due to rapid urbanization, economic growth, and environmental vulnerabilities. As populations in provinces such as Sihanoukville, Kampot, Kep, and Koh Kong continue to expand, the demand for affordable and sustainable housing has outpaced supply, leaving low-income groups, factory workers, and informal settlers particularly disadvantaged. High land costs, speculative land practices, and inadequate zoning regulations exacerbate these issues, making it difficult to allocate land for affordable housing development. Furthermore, limited access to financial products tailored for low-income households and informal workers restricts opportunities for homeownership or quality rental housing.

Adding to these challenges are weak enforcement mechanisms for existing housing policies, fragmented collaboration among stakeholders, and the lack of climate-resilient housing designs in coastal areas prone to flooding and erosion. The current efforts to address these issues, such as the National Housing Policy (2014), have laid a foundation for progress but fall short in addressing the specific regional needs of coastal provinces.

This report aims to explore the multifaceted barriers to affordable housing in these regions, analyze the roles of key stakeholders, and provide actionable recommendations for creating inclusive, sustainable, and climate-resilient housing solutions. By addressing these challenges, Cambodia's coastal provinces can foster equitable growth and improve the quality of life for their most vulnerable populations.

Figure 1: Cambodia's Coastal Provinces



Source: Authors' illustration based on an existing map from website

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The qualitative study is designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the affordable housing landscape in Cambodia's coastal provinces by addressing key aspects of market dynamics, barriers, stakeholder roles, and actionable solutions. The specific objectives are as follows:

Assess Market Dynamics and Housing Demand

The study aims to analyze the current state of the housing market in coastal regions, including Sihanoukville, Kampot, Kep, and Koh Kong. It seeks to identify trends in housing demand, particularly for affordable housing, and understand the socio-economic factors driving these trends. By evaluating the availability, quality, and affordability of housing, the survey will provide insights into the specific needs of different demographic groups, such as low-income families, factory workers, and informal settlers.

Understand Barriers to Affordable Housing Development

This objective focuses on identifying the key challenges impeding affordable housing development in coastal areas. The survey will examine land and regulatory issues, such as zoning laws, land speculation, and building regulations. It will also assess financial barriers, including the accessibility and availability of housing finance for low-income groups, and explore the social and environmental factors, such as urbanization and climate risks, that impact housing accessibility and sustainability.

Explore the Role of Stakeholders in Addressing These Challenges

The study seeks to understand the perspectives and contributions of various stakeholders, including developers, government officials, NGOs, and financial institutions, in addressing affordable housing challenges. By analyzing their roles, priorities, and collaborative efforts, the survey will uncover opportunities for multi-sectoral engagement and alignment. It will also highlight gaps in current stakeholder interactions and propose ways to enhance collaboration for more effective housing solutions.

Propose Evidence-Based Solutions and Policy Recommendations

Based on the data collected, the survey will aim to develop practical, evidence-based recommendations to address the barriers to affordable housing. These recommendations will focus on policy and regulatory reforms, innovative financing models, and the integration of sustainable practices into housing development. The findings will serve as a foundation for informing government policies, private sector strategies, and community-level initiatives to ensure long-term housing affordability and equity in Cambodia's coastal regions.

This structured approach will provide a holistic view of the affordable housing ecosystem in the studied provinces, offering actionable insights for stakeholders to address current challenges and promote sustainable housing development.

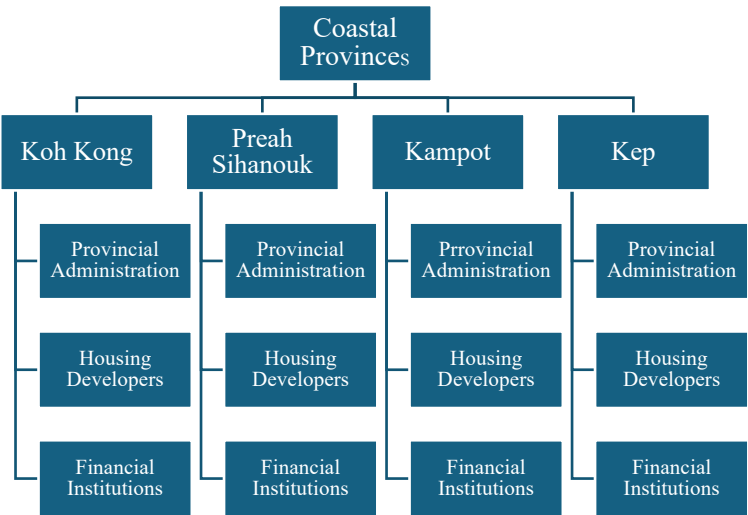
1.3 Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to gain an in-depth understanding of the complexities surrounding affordable housing in Cambodia’s coastal provinces.

Central to this approach is the collection of rich, narrative data through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders who play pivotal roles in shaping the housing landscape.

The research draws on the perspectives and experiences of provincial administration officers, housing developers, and financial institution representatives, ensuring a diverse and holistic view of the challenges and opportunities in the region. By engaging with these stakeholders across the four coastal provinces—Koh Kong, Sihanoukville, Kampot, and Kep—the study seeks to uncover nuanced insights into policy implementation, market dynamics, and stakeholder collaboration, providing a robust foundation for evidence-based recommendations.

Figure 2: Key Stakeholders included in the interviews



Source: Authors’ illustration

3. Findings from Qualitative Research

3.1 Market Dynamics and Housing Demand

Table 1 provides a concise overview of the market dynamics, key housing demand drivers, and target demographics for each of the four provinces.

Table 1: Market Dynamics and Housing Demand

Province	Market Characteristics	Key Housing Demand Drivers	Target Demographics
Koh Kong	Predominantly self-built housing on privately owned land; high construction costs and inadequate infrastructure.	Workers in special economic zones (SEZs) requiring rented accommodations.	SEZ workers and low-income households.
Sihanoukville	Influenced by industrial growth and foreign investments; high land prices and informal settlements are prevalent.	High migration due to industrial opportunities; demand for affordable rental housing.	Factory workers and migrant workers lacking affordable options.
Kampot	Small real estate market with rising land costs; speculative land fraud destabilizes the market.	Growing demand for affordable housing; vulnerable groups, including fishermen.	Fishermen and public servants requiring formal housing.
Kep	Focused on leisure and investment properties; minimal attention to affordable housing for locals.	Locals requiring affordable housing; demand overshadowed by leisure developments.	Public servants and slum dwellers needing affordable housing options.

Source: Authors’ interviews in coastal provinces from December 15-21, 2024

Overview of the Current Housing Market in Coastal Provinces

The housing markets in Cambodia’s coastal provinces, namely Koh Kong, Sihanoukville, Kampot, and Kep, demonstrate diverse characteristics shaped by urbanization, socio-economic dynamics, and regional development patterns. This section summarizes those characteristics based on the insights shared by those coastal provincial government officials who have great knowledge about the issues.

"Most people who can afford housing prefer to build their own homes on individual plots, as they value having open space around their houses. There is, however, a significant group of people who desperately need housing but cannot afford it, while rental properties remain in high demand. The target groups for

affordable housing projects are civil servants and factory workers in the SEZs. We also have plans to relocate people living along the riverbanks, but this has proven very challenging, as many have lived there for generations and rely on fishing for their livelihoods," explained an official from Koh Kong Province.

In Koh Kong, housing predominantly consists of self-built structures on privately owned land, with few formal affordable housing initiatives. High construction costs, which are approximately 30% higher than in Phnom Penh, and inadequate infrastructure, such as unreliable electricity and water supply, pose significant challenges. Workers in special economic zones (SEZs) rely heavily on rented accommodations near their places of employment.

"The price of land near the city is prohibitively high, making it unaffordable for many. However, land located about 20 kilometers from the city remains affordable, where people can commute to work by motorcycle. The primary target groups for affordable housing are civil servants and factory workers. There are also slum areas here, but relocating residents is complex, as they rely on those areas for their livelihoods," remarked a government official from Preah Sihanouk Province.

In Preah Sihanoukville, the housing market is largely influenced by industrial growth and foreign investment, particularly from Chinese developers. The high cost of land contributes to rising housing prices. While some rental accommodations are provided by Chinese investors, these primarily cater to foreign workers, leaving Cambodian workers underserved. Informal housing settlements, often located near railways and hospitals, remain common.

"Concessional land allocated to veterans often ends up in the hands of other individuals. According to the law, veterans are eligible to receive land titles after five years. However, many are elderly and in poor health, and some sadly pass away before the five-year period is completed," explained a government official in Kampot Province.

In Kampot, which is the least urbanized among the provinces, the real estate market is relatively small. However, there is a growing demand for affordable housing. Speculative land fraud and high land prices undermine market stability. Vulnerable groups, such as fishermen residing in substandard housing along riverbanks, lack access to formal housing solutions.

"There are 300 families living in the slum, including fishing families, vendors, and public servants. Public housing could provide a valuable opportunity for public servants, especially given the exceptionally high rental prices in the area," stated a government official from Kep Province.

In Kep, the housing market is primarily focused on leisure properties and investments by non-residents. Consequently, there is minimal attention to affordable housing for local populations. High rental prices, ranging from \$300 to \$400 per month, and a nascent real estate market further limit accessibility for locals. Many residents prefer to purchase land and build their own homes rather than buying from developers.

Analysis of Trends, Including Demand for Affordable Housing

The demand for affordable housing across these provinces is driven by various socio-economic factors, including income disparities, migration, and regional economic activities.

Urbanization and migration play significant roles in shaping housing demand. Sihanoukville and Koh Kong, for instance, experience high levels of migration due to industrial opportunities within SEZs. Migrants, including factory workers and public servants, constitute a substantial portion of the population requiring affordable housing. However, high land prices across all provinces present a major challenge to the development of affordable housing, with Sihanoukville and Kampot particularly affected by speculative practices and unregulated development.

Rental housing trends further underscore the housing deficit. In Koh Kong and Sihanoukville, factory workers and migrants are heavily reliant on rental accommodations, often in substandard conditions. These rental options fail to meet the demand for affordable, quality housing. Meanwhile, informal housing persists in Kampot and Kep, where vulnerable groups live in unsafe conditions exacerbated by environmental factors such as flooding and erosion.

Identification of Target Demographics for Affordable Housing Projects

The key target demographics for affordable housing initiatives vary across provinces but include several overlapping groups.

Factory workers, particularly those employed in SEZs in Koh Kong and Sihanoukville, are among the primary groups requiring affordable housing. These workers often face unstable incomes and limited access to rental or ownership opportunities. Public servants in Kampot and Kep also face significant housing affordability challenges, as high land and rental costs make formal housing inaccessible.

Fishermen and other vulnerable groups, such as slum dwellers along riverbanks in Kampot and informal settlements in Kep, represent some of the most disadvantaged populations. These groups require urgent housing interventions to improve their living conditions and reduce exposure to environmental risks.

Finally, migrant workers in urban centers like Sihanoukville represent another critical demographic for affordable housing, as they rely heavily on affordable rental options close to their workplaces.

3.2 Barriers to Affordable Housing

Table 2 provides a concise summary of the barriers to affordable housing across the four provinces, categorizing the challenges into land and regulatory issues, financial barriers, and social and environmental factors.

Table 2: Barriers to Affordable Housing

Province	Land and Regulatory Challenges	Financial Barriers	Social and Environmental Factors
Koh Kong	High construction costs; limited enforcement of building regulations; unplanned developments.	Limited access to financing for low-income households; high interest rates on loans.	Inadequate infrastructure (water, electricity); reliance on self-built housing.
Sihanoukville	Speculative land practices inflate prices; unregulated foreign investments dominate the market.	Mortgage products cater to formal workers only; elevated land costs increase housing prices.	Urbanization pressures leave locals reliant on informal housing; climate risks such as flooding.
Kampot	Speculative fraud destabilizes the market; lack of comprehensive zoning laws.	High construction costs deter developers; financial institutions exclude informal sector workers.	Vulnerable groups live in unsafe riverbank housing; resistance to relocation programs.
Kep	High land prices due to leisure-focused developments; weak enforcement of building codes.	Developers prioritize high-end projects; lack of tailored mortgage options for locals.	Climate vulnerabilities (flooding, erosion); community resistance to resettlement initiatives.

Source: Authors' interviews in coastal provinces from December 15-21, 2024

Land and Regulatory Challenges

“Land prices in Sihanoukville are incredibly high due to foreign investment, especially from Chinese businesses. This makes it nearly impossible to offer units at genuinely affordable prices for local workers or civil servants.” (Borey Owner)

Land and regulatory challenges constitute significant barriers to the development and accessibility of affordable housing across Cambodia's coastal provinces. These challenges are rooted in issues related to zoning laws, land costs, and building regulations.

Firstly, the lack of comprehensive zoning laws in the coastal provinces has resulted in unregulated and fragmented housing markets. In provinces such as Sihanoukville and Kampot, unplanned developments have exacerbated housing mismatches and encouraged speculative land practices, complicating efforts to allocate land for affordable housing initiatives.

Secondly, high land prices pose a critical challenge, particularly in urbanized areas like Sihanoukville, where speculation and foreign investments, predominantly from Chinese developers, have inflated costs. This has rendered affordable housing inaccessible to low- and middle-income groups. In smaller provinces like Kampot and Kep, speculative practices often lead to fraudulent transactions, destabilizing the housing market and undermining public trust.

Lastly, inconsistencies in the enforcement of building regulations further hinder housing development. Informal settlements, which are prevalent in vulnerable areas such as riverbanks in Kampot and industrial zones in Koh Kong, often lack adherence to safety and structural standards. The proliferation of unsafe housing structures highlights the need for stricter regulatory oversight.

Financial Barriers

“Most of our prospective clients are low-income workers, with monthly payments of around \$100 to \$200 per month, which makes it impossible for them to afford a house worth more than \$20,000. The banking system cannot help because loans for these clients are rarely approved.” (Borey Owner)

Financial constraints, including limited access to mortgage financing and high construction costs, represent a major impediment to affordable housing.

Access to mortgage financing remains limited for a large portion of the population, particularly for those engaged in informal or seasonal work. Financial institutions generally cater to salaried workers in formal employment, leaving many excluded. Additionally, stringent eligibility requirements, such as stable income, credit histories, and collateral, further restrict access to housing loans for low-income households. Interest rates, which range from 11% to 18%, are prohibitively high and deter many families from seeking financing.

The high cost of construction exacerbates financial barriers. In coastal provinces, construction expenses are approximately 30% higher than in Phnom Penh due to elevated material and labor costs. This economic reality drives developers to focus on high-margin housing projects, which are more profitable but fail to address the needs of low-income

populations. For example, in Kep and Kampot, developers primarily invest in leisure properties or high-end residential projects, leaving affordable housing largely unaddressed.

Social and Environmental Factors

Social and environmental challenges further compound the barriers to affordable housing in Cambodia's coastal provinces. These issues are particularly pronounced where rapid urbanization intersects with climate vulnerabilities.

Urbanization has created uneven housing supply and demand dynamics. In Sihanoukville, rapid industrialization has led to a housing market dominated by accommodations for industrial workers and foreign investors. This has left local low-income populations dependent on informal settlements. In contrast, urbanization pressures in Kampot and Kep are less intense but still contribute to growing housing demand, particularly among migrants and public servants.

Environmental risks, including flooding, erosion, and extreme weather events, are particularly acute in coastal regions. Housing developments in these areas require climate-resilient designs to mitigate these risks, but such adaptations increase construction costs, deterring developers from pursuing affordable housing projects. Vulnerable populations, such as slum dwellers along riverbanks in Kampot and Kep, face heightened exposure to these risks, further emphasizing the urgent need for sustainable housing solutions.

Community acceptance poses an additional barrier. Relocation programs designed to move slum dwellers and other vulnerable groups to safer housing often meet resistance, particularly when livelihoods are disrupted. This is especially evident among fishing communities, where proximity to waterways is essential for economic survival. Insufficient community engagement exacerbates these challenges, reducing the effectiveness of housing interventions.

The barriers to affordable housing in Cambodia's coastal provinces are multifaceted and deeply interconnected. Land and regulatory constraints, financial inaccessibility, and socio-environmental challenges collectively hinder the development and accessibility of affordable housing. Addressing these barriers requires a comprehensive strategy that includes the enforcement of zoning and building regulations, the introduction of tailored financial products for low-income households, and the integration of climate resilience into housing designs. Furthermore, engaging local communities and fostering public-private partnerships are critical steps in overcoming these challenges and promoting equitable and sustainable housing solutions.

3.3 Stakeholder Roles

Provincial Government

Government officials play a pivotal role in addressing affordable housing challenges through policymaking, implementing initiatives, and fostering collaboration with various stakeholders.

Table 3: Government Roles in Addressing Affordable Housing in Coastal Provinces

Province	Policies and Initiatives	Collaboration with Stakeholders	Challenges
Koh Kong	Limited affordable housing initiatives; focus on industrial and SEZ-driven housing needs.	Partnerships with SEZ operators to address worker housing; limited collaboration with NGOs and developers.	Resource constraints limit the capacity to enforce housing policies; high construction costs deter affordable projects.
Sihanoukville	National Housing Policy framework in place; insufficient enforcement; reliance on private developers for housing projects.	Collaborations with foreign developers dominate; minimal engagement with local communities for affordable housing solutions.	Speculative land practices and unregulated foreign investments inflate housing costs; enforcement of building codes remains weak.
Kampot	Identification of state-owned land for potential housing projects; speculative land practices hinder policy implementation.	Efforts to engage NGOs for slum upgrading; fragmented collaboration with private developers and financial institutions.	Bureaucratic delays and fragmented initiatives reduce policy effectiveness; speculative land fraud destabilizes the market.
Kep	Leisure-focused development policies dominate; minimal focus on affordable housing for local populations.	Limited partnerships with developers and NGOs; focus on attracting high-end residential investments over affordable housing.	Limited state-owned land for housing; focus on leisure properties leaves affordable housing initiatives underfunded.

Source: Authors' interviews in coastal provinces from December 15-21, 2024

The National Housing Policy (2014) provides a foundational framework for addressing housing affordability. However, enforcement of this policy remains inconsistent across provinces, and the lack of regional customization limits its effectiveness in addressing unique challenges in coastal areas. For instance, efforts to mandate affordable housing in private developments have seen limited success due to weak implementation mechanisms.

Provincial governments have initiated some affordable housing projects, such as identifying state-owned land for development in Kampot and Kep. Despite these efforts,

resource constraints, bureaucratic delays, and fragmented execution often hinder the realization of these initiatives.

Collaboration with other stakeholders, including developers, NGOs, and financial institutions, is increasingly recognized as essential. However, the absence of clearly defined frameworks for such partnerships limits their effectiveness in delivering sustainable and affordable housing solutions.

Housing Developers

“Our challenge is the cost of construction materials. Even with shipping from Phnom Penh, materials are cheaper than buying them locally.” (Borey Owner)

“The local people in Kep prefer to buy land and build their own houses. They don’t see value in buying pre-built homes.” (Borey Owner)

Developers are central to the provision of affordable housing, as their decisions regarding project costs, target markets, and the balance between affordability and quality significantly influence housing accessibility. However, their priorities are often shaped by profitability and market dynamics.

Table 4: Housing Developer Roles in Addressing Affordable Housing in Coastal Provinces

Province	Focus Areas	Challenges	Potential Contributions
Koh Kong	Catering to SEZ workers and industrial needs; limited engagement in affordable housing projects.	High construction costs deter affordable housing investments; lack of infrastructure support for low-cost developments.	Partnering with SEZ operators and government for worker housing; leveraging public-private partnerships.
Sihanoukville	Prioritizing high-end developments and foreign investor-driven projects; minimal local housing provisions.	Speculative land practices inflate development costs; foreign investor focus limits affordability considerations.	Incorporating affordable housing units into larger developments; collaborating with government and financial institutions.
Kampot	Speculative projects dominate; limited affordable housing initiatives targeting low-income groups.	Land speculation destabilizes the market; minimal incentives to address local affordable housing demand.	Targeting low-cost housing for fishermen and vulnerable groups; engaging in partnerships for slum upgrading.

Kep	Leisure and investment properties for outsiders dominate; negligible focus on housing for local populations.	High land prices and developer focus on leisure properties marginalize local affordable housing needs.	Exploring mixed-income housing models to balance leisure developments with local housing needs.
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Source: Authors’ interviews in coastal provinces from December 15-21, 2024

Firstly, developers encounter elevated construction costs in coastal provinces, particularly in Sihanoukville and Koh Kong, where the cost of materials and labor is significantly higher. This economic reality discourages investment in affordable housing, as developers often prioritize high-margin projects that promise greater returns.

Secondly, the target markets of developers tend to exclude low- and middle-income households. In Kampot and Kep, for example, the focus is predominantly on leisure properties and high-end residential developments, leaving the housing needs of lower-income groups unmet. Similarly, in Sihanoukville, developers primarily cater to foreign investors and industrial accommodations, often overlooking the needs of local workers.

Lastly, developers face challenges in balancing affordability with quality. While cost efficiency is essential for affordable housing projects, compromises in quality are a concern. Incentives from the government, such as subsidies or public-private partnerships, are necessary to ensure that affordability does not result in substandard housing.

Financial Institutions

“After COVID-19, many buyers defaulted on their payment plans, leaving us with unsold units and financial difficulties.” (Financial Institution)

“In recent years, there’s been a lack of trust in the real estate sector here, partly due to fraudulent companies, which has hurt our sales.” (Financial Institution)

Financial institutions play a critical role in shaping housing accessibility through their financial products, strategies to overcome challenges, and innovative solutions.

Housing loans offered by banks and microfinance institutions (MFIs) predominantly target formally employed individuals with stable incomes. These products are structured around the “3Cs” framework—capacity, collateral, and creditworthiness—which excludes a significant proportion of the population engaged in informal or seasonal work. Furthermore, high interest rates, typically ranging from 11% to 18%, create an additional barrier for low-income households seeking housing finance.

Banks also face challenges in managing risks associated with non-performing loans (NPLs), particularly in sectors with irregular incomes, such as fishing and tourism. Additionally, short repayment terms, which are common for MFI loans (6–10 years), make housing loans less accessible for households requiring long-term affordability.

Despite these challenges, some banks have introduced innovative financial products. For example, ACLEDA Bank’s “Clean Collateral” product allows borrowers to access small loans without traditional collateral. Partnerships between banks, developers, and government entities are also emerging as a promising approach to financing affordable housing projects. However, these efforts remain limited in scale and require further expansion to meet growing housing demand.

Table 5: Financial Institution Roles in Addressing Affordable Housing in Coastal Provinces

Province	Current Role	Challenges	Proposed Solutions
Koh Kong	Provide limited mortgage products targeting formal SEZ workers; focus on small-scale loans with high interest rates.	High risks of default among informal workers; high construction costs increase loan repayment burdens.	Develop microloan schemes tailored for SEZ workers; collaborate with NGOs and developers to improve accessibility.
Sihanoukville	Offer loans primarily for high-value real estate and foreign investments; limited focus on affordable housing financing.	Speculative land investments inflate loan risks; lack of targeted products for low-income and local workers.	Introduce subsidized loans for affordable housing; collaborate with government on public-private financing initiatives.
Kampot	Provide traditional housing loans with high interest rates; low engagement in financing for low-income groups.	Limited demand for affordable housing loans due to high land costs; financial products unsuitable for informal economy workers.	Expand loan terms and reduce interest rates for low-income borrowers; engage in partnerships to fund slum upgrading.
Kep	Focus on conventional mortgage products; minimal involvement in financing for affordable housing or mixed-income projects.	Few innovative financing solutions; exclusion of low-income groups due to strict eligibility criteria.	Develop mixed-income mortgage products; collaborate with local developers to create flexible loan packages for locals.

Source: Authors’ interviews in coastal provinces from December 15-21, 2024

The roles of developers, government officials, NGOs, and banks are interconnected and vital to addressing affordable housing challenges in Cambodia’s coastal provinces. Developers face significant economic and market pressures that discourage affordable housing investments, while government officials must enhance policy enforcement and foster effective partnerships. NGOs continue to fill critical gaps in housing provision and advocacy, although their efforts are often constrained by resource limitations. Financial institutions, with their capacity to innovate and collaborate, hold considerable potential to

expand housing accessibility. A coordinated and multi-sectoral approach is imperative to overcome these barriers and promote sustainable and affordable housing solutions.

4. Factors Impeding Real Estate Development

4.1 Case Study 1: Monopoly Issues Related to Utility Distribution in Koh Kong

Koh Kong province, located in Cambodia's southwestern region, is witnessing increasing challenges due to the monopoly over electricity and clean water distribution by a prominent tycoon. This monopolistic control not only inflates costs for local businesses but also significantly hampers real estate development, a key driver of the provincial economy. Evidence from interviews with developers, financial institutions, and government officials sheds light on the pervasive impact of this issue.

"The real estate market lacks competitiveness, as it is heavily influenced by a prominent tycoon who monopolizes utility distribution in the province. It's nearly impossible to generate a reasonable profit in this business because the abbot takes all the food on the plate and leaves only scraps for the novice monks," lamented a real estate developer, who halted his housing project due to the exorbitant utility connection fees imposed by the monopoly.

The monopoly over utilities has led to consistently high costs for electricity and water in Koh Kong compared to neighboring provinces. Businesses report paying up to almost double higher than elsewhere for electricity and water, with no alternative providers to ensure competitive pricing. This increased overhead discourages small and medium enterprises (SMEs) from expanding their operations and reduces the attractiveness of the province for new investors.

The real estate sector in Koh Kong is particularly affected by these inflated utility costs. Another developer highlights that high operational costs increase the overall expenses of building and maintaining properties, making housing projects less affordable for buyers. This cost burden also limits the profitability of developers, deterring large-scale real estate investments.

Impact on Stakeholders

- *Buyers:* High utility costs add to the financial strain of purchasing and maintaining properties, reducing demand for housing in Koh Kong.
- *Developers:* Unpredictable and high expenses discourage developers from launching new projects, with many citing the need for greater transparency and regulation of utility pricing.
- *Financial Institutions:* Banks and microfinance institutions perceive increased risks associated with real estate investments in Koh Kong, given the unpredictability and utility supply and the rising operational costs and reduced market attractiveness.

Local government officials acknowledge the detrimental impact of the utility monopoly but face limitations in implementing reforms. The lack of regulatory frameworks to curb

monopolistic practices or encourage alternative providers exacerbates the issue. Efforts to promote public-private partnerships (PPPs) in utility distribution have yet to materialize, leaving businesses and residents dependent on the monopolist's terms.

The monopoly on electricity and water distribution in Koh Kong creates a significant barrier to economic development, particularly in the real estate sector. Addressing this issue requires urgent government intervention, including regulatory reforms to break monopolistic practices and encourage competition. Such measures would not only reduce costs for businesses and consumers but also create a more conducive environment for real estate investment and overall economic growth in Koh Kong.

(Sources: Authors interviews with various stakeholders in Koh Kong province)

4.2 Case Study 3: Elevated Construction Costs in Preah Sihanouk Province

Preah Sihanouk Province, a rapidly developing coastal area, has become a focal point for Cambodia's real estate sector. Despite its potential for economic growth, high construction costs driven by unique local challenges have become a significant barrier to real estate development. This case study examines the reasons for elevated costs and their implications for developers, financial institutions, and the housing market.

Key Drivers of High Construction Costs

"Labor costs have increased by 30–40% due to intense competition for skilled workers. In addition, the majority of our construction materials are imported from Phnom Penh or China, which significantly raises expenses due to transportation and import costs," explained a representative from a borey developer.

Construction in Preah Sihanouk faces significant cost challenges due to its heavy reliance on imported materials, such as high-quality steel and cement sourced from neighboring countries. Import duties, transportation expenses, and exchange rate fluctuations further inflate project costs. Additionally, the influx of foreign investors and large-scale industrial projects has intensified competition for skilled labor, driving wages higher than in other provinces. This heightened demand makes it difficult for developers to maintain a stable workforce, compounding the overall cost pressures on construction projects in the region.

Implications for Real Estate Development

- **Increased Property Prices:** Developers are forced to pass on higher construction costs to buyers, making properties less affordable. This dynamic disproportionately impacts middle- and low-income households, reducing overall housing accessibility.
- **Reduced Investment Viability:** High costs erode the profit margins of developers, discouraging investment in affordable housing projects. Many developers focus instead on high-end markets or delay project launches altogether.
- **Strain on Financial Institutions:** Banks and microfinance institutions report increased risk when providing loans to developers in Preah Sihanouk. High costs reduce the

feasibility of projects, raising the likelihood of non-performing loans and deterring lending in the sector.

- **Community Impact:** The lack of affordable housing exacerbates socio-economic disparities, leaving key demographic groups, such as factory workers and civil servants, unable to access suitable housing. This challenge highlights the need for innovative solutions to bridge the affordability gap.

The high construction costs in Preah Sihanouk Province present significant barriers to the growth of its real estate sector. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-stakeholder approach, including reducing reliance on imported materials, improving infrastructure, and incentivizing affordable housing development. Collaboration between developers, financial institutions, and local authorities is critical to ensuring the sustainable growth of the province's real estate market. This case underscores the importance of comprehensive policies to foster a competitive and inclusive housing market while addressing cost-related obstacles.

(Sources: Authors interviews with stakeholders in Preah Sihanouk province)

4.3 Case Study 3: Land Fraud in Kampot

Land fraud poses significant threats to the stability of the real estate sector, eroding trust among buyers, developers, and financial institutions. A notable example is the case of Cambodian tycoon Chea Saron, whose fraudulent activities in Kampot province led to substantial financial losses and widespread distrust.

Chea Saron, a prominent real estate developer holding the honorific title "Oknha," was arrested along with eight accomplices for defrauding over 2,000 families of nearly \$40 million through deceptive real estate projects in Kampot province.¹

Heng Ith, a 65-year-old investor, initially invested \$10,000 in 2020 with the promise of securing a spot in a borey and began receiving \$250 in monthly dividends. Encouraged by the steady returns and the "convincing" demeanor of Saron's team, she continued to invest further. *"An associate of Saron's would drive me to microfinance institutions and banks, including BNK, Prasac, and Hattha, to obtain loans, and then take me directly to Saron's local office afterward," Heng Ith explained (VOA News, 2023).*²

Saron's company, Chea Saron Realty Co., Ltd., promised to build affordable condominiums for low- to middle-income individuals. Many victims borrowed money from banks and microfinance institutions to invest in these projects, enticed by guarantees that the company would cover bank interest and provide profits. However, the company failed to honor these commitments, leaving investors burdened with debt and no returns.

Impact on Stakeholders

¹ <https://kiripost.com/stories/kampot-courts-continue-in-chea-saron-fraud-case>

² <https://www.voanews.com/a/cambodian-tycoons-under-fire-for-alleged-real-estate-schemes/7224584.html>

- *Buyers:* The fraudulent scheme left thousands of families in financial distress, eroding confidence in real estate investments. Victims faced mounting debts without the promised housing, leading to skepticism toward future real estate opportunities.
- *Developers:* Such fraudulent activities tarnish the reputation of legitimate developers, making it challenging to gain public trust. The sector suffers as potential buyers become wary of investing in new projects.
- *Financial Institutions:* Banks and microfinance institutions that provided loans to the victims faced increased non-performing loans, affecting their financial health. This situation prompts stricter lending policies, potentially limiting access to credit for genuine real estate developments.

In response to the fraud, the Kampot Provincial Court froze 95 bank accounts, and 1,791 plots of land associated with Chea Saron's company. These measures aim to recover losses and deter similar fraudulent activities in the future.

The Chea Saron case underscores the detrimental effects of land fraud on the real estate sector. It highlights the necessity for stringent regulatory oversight, transparent business practices, and due diligence by all stakeholders to maintain market stability and trust.

(Sources: Authors interviews with stakeholders in Kampot and news available on various websites)

4.4 Case Study 4: Landholding by Outsiders in Kep Province and Its Implications

Kep Province, renowned for its coastal beauty and proximity to Phnom Penh, has become a hotspot for land acquisition by individuals and entities from outside the province, including foreign investors. This trend has reshaped the local real estate landscape, with far-reaching implications for housing accessibility, development priorities, and economic equity.

From the interviews with various stakeholders, the study finds that significant portions of land in Kep are owned by Cambodian nationals residing outside the province and foreign investors attracted by the area's tourism potential. These landholders often purchase large parcels for speculative purposes or luxury developments. A substantial share of these plots remains undeveloped for extended periods, contributing to the underutilization of the province's land resources.

The influx of external investors in Kep Province has significantly impacted real estate development by driving up land prices, making it difficult for local developers and residents to compete and limiting opportunities for affordable housing. Outsider landownership has restricted access to land for local stakeholders, disrupting traditional land use and marginalizing low-income groups. Development priorities have shifted toward profit-driven luxury projects, further exacerbating housing shortages for local workers. Additionally, the concentration of wealth among external stakeholders has

widened economic disparities, leaving local residents with rising costs and fewer opportunities.

Stakeholders in Kep Province highlight distinct challenges stemming from outsider landownership. Local developers face difficulties acquiring land at competitive prices, limiting their ability to build housing for the local market. Provincial authorities recognize the issues caused by speculative land practices but lack effective regulatory tools to address them. Meanwhile, residents express concerns over losing access to affordable housing and feeling excluded from the province's economic growth, with rising land prices threatening their livelihoods.

Potential Solutions

To address the challenges of outsider landownership, several potential solutions have been proposed:

- **Regulatory Reforms:** Introduce stricter regulations to discourage speculative landholding and prioritize developments that align with local needs.
- **Land Use Incentives:** Offer incentives to develop underutilized plots for affordable housing or community-focused projects.
- **Community Land Banks:** Establish land banks to secure plots for local development, ensuring long-term accessibility and equitable use of land resources.

The trend of landholding by outsiders in Kep Province presents significant challenges to the local real estate market and community well-being. By addressing speculative practices and aligning development priorities with local needs, Kep can balance external investment with sustainable growth and economic inclusivity. This case underscores the importance of thoughtful land management policies to mitigate the negative impacts of external landownership on provincial development.

(Sources: Authors interviews with stakeholders in Kep province)

5. Comparative Analysis and Emerging Themes

5.1 Comparative Analysis

Similarities and Differences Across Stakeholder Groups

In Koh Kong: “High utility costs and delays in getting electricity and water connections make affordable housing even harder to achieve” (Borey owner).

In Kep: “The local people in Kep prefer to buy land and build their own houses.” (Borey Owner)

Stakeholders share a broad understanding of the urgent need for affordable housing in Cambodia’s coastal provinces, particularly for low-income groups, factory workers, and informal settlers. Across all groups, there is consensus that high land costs, speculative

practices, and weak regulatory enforcement pose significant barriers to affordable housing development. Furthermore, most stakeholders recognize the potential of partnerships and collaboration to address these issues.

Table 6: Comparative Analysis in Coastal Provinces

Aspect	Similarities	Differences
Shared Perspectives	Broad agreement on the urgent need for affordable housing, particularly for low-income groups and informal settlers.	Developers prioritize profitability and high-margin projects, often excluding low-income housing.
Developers	Consensus on the significant barriers posed by high land costs and speculative practices.	NGOs and government officials focus on inclusivity, emphasizing the incorporation of affordable housing into plans.
Provincial Government Officials	Recognition of the potential of partnerships and collaboration to address challenges.	Banks highlight financial risks and cater primarily to formal workers, excluding informal workers and low-income groups.
Financial Institutions	General acknowledgment of financial constraints in housing development.	Kampot and Kep focus on slum upgrading and state-owned land utilization, while Sihanoukville emphasizes industrial housing.
Regional Approaches	Agreement on the need for targeted regional strategies.	Stakeholder collaboration remains fragmented, limiting the impact of local initiatives.

Source: Authors’ interviews in coastal provinces from December 15-21, 2024

However, there are notable differences in priorities and perspectives. Developers focus predominantly on profitability, prioritizing high-margin projects and foreign investors over affordable housing for low-income groups. In contrast, NGOs and government officials emphasize the need to incorporate affordable housing into development plans, advocating for increased inclusivity. Banks, meanwhile, highlight financial risks such as non-performing loans and cater primarily to formal workers with stable incomes, excluding informal workers and low-income groups. Additionally, while government officials acknowledge resource and enforcement constraints, their approaches differ regionally. Kampot and Kep focus on slum upgrading and state-owned land utilization, while Sihanoukville emphasizes industrial and foreign-investor-driven development.

Evaluation of Current Policies and Initiatives

The National Housing Policy (2014) provides an overarching framework for affordable housing but lacks effective enforcement mechanisms and region-specific adaptations. Local initiatives, such as the allocation of state-owned land for housing projects in Kampot and Kep, are often undermined by speculative practices and bureaucratic inefficiencies. Moreover, stakeholder collaboration remains fragmented, limiting the impact of initiatives. For example, while NGOs implement slum upgrading programs,

these efforts are often disconnected from government plans and private-sector projects. Current policies also fail to adequately address the needs of informal workers or incorporate climate resilience, leaving significant gaps in housing accessibility and sustainability.

5.2 Emerging Themes

Importance of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) are crucial for mobilizing resources, expertise, and innovation to address barriers in affordable housing development. By incentivizing mixed-income housing models, PPPs can ensure both profitability for developers and affordability for low-income households. However, the effectiveness of these partnerships is limited by the lack of clear frameworks and incentives. Structured guidelines and shared objectives are needed to facilitate meaningful collaborations among stakeholders.

Role of Innovative Financing Models and Regulatory Reforms

Innovative financing models are essential to expand housing accessibility for low-income groups and informal workers. Financial institutions must develop tailored products, such as microloans and long-term, low-interest mortgages, to cater to underserved populations. Simultaneously, regulatory reforms are needed to curb speculative practices, strengthen zoning laws, and improve land titling processes. Enhanced regulatory clarity can encourage investments in affordable housing while reducing market volatility. Programs such as ACLEDA's "Clean Collateral" demonstrate the potential of innovative financial products but require scaling to achieve broader impact.

Need for Sustainable and Climate-Resilient Housing Solutions

The vulnerability of coastal provinces to flooding, erosion, and other climate-related risks underscores the importance of sustainable and climate-resilient housing solutions. Integrating climate-resilient designs, such as elevated structures and flood-resistant materials, into housing projects is critical for ensuring long-term viability. Moreover, government policies must align housing developments and relocation programs with broader climate resilience goals to address both environmental challenges and housing needs effectively.

The comparative analysis reveals shared challenges and differing priorities among stakeholders in addressing affordable housing. Developers, banks, NGOs, and government officials approach the issue from distinct perspectives, yet all recognize the barriers posed by land costs, speculative practices, and regulatory gaps. Emerging themes highlight the critical roles of public-private partnerships, innovative financing, and sustainable practices in bridging these gaps. Coordinated, multi-sectoral strategies are essential to address housing accessibility, affordability, and resilience, ensuring inclusive development in Cambodia's coastal provinces.

6. Recommendations

These recommendations provide a comprehensive and actionable framework for addressing the challenges of affordable housing in Cambodia's coastal provinces, emphasizing inclusive, sustainable, and collaborative approaches to ensure long-term success.

6.1 Policy and Regulatory Reforms

To address the barriers to affordable housing, strengthening and enforcing zoning regulations is essential. Revised zoning laws should reduce speculative land practices and ensure that sufficient land is allocated for affordable housing development. Land-use plans must be tailored to the unique needs of each province, with a particular emphasis on providing affordable housing in urban and peri-urban areas. Additionally, developers should be incentivized through tax breaks, subsidies, and streamlined approval processes to integrate affordable housing units into their projects. Policies should also mandate a specific percentage of new developments to cater to low-income groups through social housing requirements.

6.2 Financial Solutions

The development of accessible mortgage schemes and microfinance options is critical for enabling low-income households and informal workers to access housing finance. Financial institutions should be encouraged to offer tailored mortgage products with low-interest rates and flexible repayment terms to accommodate the financial constraints of these groups. Moreover, microfinance solutions should be promoted for incremental housing improvements and small-scale construction. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) present a viable strategy for financing affordable housing. Establishing clear frameworks for PPPs will enable collaboration between private developers, financial institutions, and government agencies to co-fund infrastructure and housing projects, ensuring scalability and long-term sustainability.

6.3 Collaboration and Capacity Building

Effective collaboration among stakeholders is crucial for addressing housing challenges. Regular forums should be established to facilitate dialogue and align strategies among NGOs, banks, developers, and government agencies. Joint task forces should be created to address specific challenges and housing needs in each province. Additionally, capacity-building programs are necessary to enhance the skills of provincial and local government officials. These programs should focus on improving competencies in project management, regulatory enforcement, and community engagement. Strengthening technical expertise will ensure the effective evaluation and implementation of housing initiatives.

6.4 Long-Term Sustainability

Integrating environmental considerations into housing development is essential for ensuring resilience and sustainability. Housing designs should account for climate risks, such as flooding and erosion, particularly in coastal areas. The use of sustainable building materials and renewable energy should be promoted in all housing projects. To ensure affordability for future generations, mechanisms such as land banks and rent price caps should be implemented. Additionally, housing policies should be periodically reviewed and adapted to address changing demographics and economic conditions, maintaining long-term accessibility and equity in the housing market.

7. Conclusion

Addressing the challenges of affordable housing in Cambodia's coastal provinces requires a comprehensive understanding of the barriers and opportunities identified in the findings. The key issues include high land costs, speculative land practices, limited access to housing finance, weak enforcement of zoning and regulatory frameworks, and inadequate infrastructure. These factors have perpetuated housing shortages for low-income groups, factory workers, and informal settlers, leaving significant gaps in accessibility and sustainability. Current initiatives, including the National Housing Policy (2014), provide a foundation but require stronger enforcement mechanisms, tailored regional strategies, and better coordination among stakeholders.

The findings emphasize the critical need for collaborative approaches involving public-private partnerships (PPPs), innovative financial solutions, and capacity-building programs. Incorporating climate resilience into housing designs and ensuring affordability for future generations are essential for sustainable development. Stakeholders, including developers, financial institutions, government agencies, and NGOs, must align their efforts to create inclusive, scalable, and adaptable solutions to meet the housing needs of diverse populations.

A call to action is vital for stakeholders to implement the recommended solutions. Developers should integrate affordable housing units into their projects with support from government incentives. Financial institutions must design accessible mortgage products and expand microfinance options to cater to low-income households. Government agencies need to strengthen zoning laws, enforce land-use policies, and provide capacity-building for local authorities. NGOs should continue to advocate for vulnerable groups while collaborating with developers and government bodies to scale community-based housing initiatives.

By prioritizing these actions, Cambodia's coastal provinces can address housing affordability challenges, promote equitable urban development, and create a sustainable housing market that benefits all segments of society. The collective commitment of all stakeholders is essential to achieving these goals and ensuring long-term housing security for Cambodia's growing population.

Annex 1: Fieldwork mission to collect information from stakeholders

ក្រសួងអប់រំ យុវជន និងកីឡា
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, YOUTH AND SPORT
សាកលវិទ្យាល័យជាតិគ្រប់គ្រង
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF MANAGEMENT



ព្រះរាជាណាចក្រកម្ពុជា
KINGDOM OF CAMBODIA
ជាតិ សាសនា ព្រះមហាក្សត្រ
NATION RELIGION KING

លេខ: ២៤៤/២០២៤ ល.ជ.គ.១៤៥

លិខិតឧទ្ទេសនាម

យោង ៖ លិខិតស្នើសុំចុះថ្ងៃទី១២ ខែធ្នូ ឆ្នាំ២០២៤ របស់នាយកមជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឧត្តមភាពស្រាវជ្រាវ និងនវានុវត្តន៍ នៃសាកលវិទ្យាល័យជាតិគ្រប់គ្រង។

មន្ត្រីរាជការ និងបុគ្គលិក នៃសាកលវិទ្យាល័យជាតិគ្រប់គ្រង មានរាយនាមខាងក្រោមត្រូវបានអនុញ្ញាតឲ្យដឹកនាំក្រុមការងារចុះប្រមូលទិន្នន័យសម្រាប់គម្រោងស្រាវជ្រាវ ក្រោមប្រធានបទស្តីពី “លំនៅឋានដែលមានតម្លៃសមរម្យនៅទីក្រុងភ្នំពេញ និងបណ្តាខេត្តជាប់មាត់សមុទ្រ” ដែលនឹងប្រព្រឹត្តទៅចាប់ពីថ្ងៃទី១៦ ដល់ថ្ងៃទី២១ ខែធ្នូ ឆ្នាំ២០២៤នៅខេត្តកោះកុង ខេត្តព្រះសីហនុ ខេត្តកំពត និងខេត្តកែប។

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- ២- លោក គឹម វ៉ាវ៉ា នាយកវិទ្យាស្ថានស្រាវជ្រាវសេដ្ឋកិច្ចអាស៊ាន
- ៣- លោកស្រី លី សុគន្ធី មន្ត្រីមជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឧត្តមភាពស្រាវជ្រាវ និងនវានុវត្តន៍
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- កាលបរិច្ឆេទចេញដំណើរ : ថ្ងៃទី១៥ ខែធ្នូ ឆ្នាំ២០២៤

- កាលបរិច្ឆេទត្រឡប់វិញ : ថ្ងៃទី២២ ខែធ្នូ ឆ្នាំ២០២៤

- មធ្យោបាយធ្វើដំណើរ : រថយន្តធូល

ការចំណាយសម្រាប់បេសកកម្មនេះ ជាបន្ទុករបស់សាកលវិទ្យាល័យជាតិគ្រប់គ្រង។

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សាកលវិទ្យាធិការ

សាស្ត្រាចារ្យ ហោ ម៉េង

កន្លែងទទួល៖

- អាជ្ញាធរពាក់ព័ន្ធ “ដើម្បីជ្រាបជាតិមាន”
- ការិយាល័យគណនេយ្យ “ដើម្បីមុខការ”
- សាមីខ្លួន “ដើម្បីអនុវត្ត”
- ឯកសារ-កាលប្បវត្តិ

Annex 2: Guiding Questions

A2.1. Guiding Questions for Developers

1. Market Dynamics and Trends

- How would you describe the current state of the housing market in Phnom Penh and the coastal provinces?
- What trends are you observing in terms of demand for affordable housing in these areas?

2. Challenges in Affordable Housing Development

- What are the main challenges you face when developing affordable housing projects?
- How do land costs, construction costs, and regulatory requirements impact the affordability of housing?

3. Target Demographics

- Who do you consider the primary target market for affordable housing in Phnom Penh and the coastal regions?
- How do you determine the pricing and design of affordable housing units to meet the needs of this demographic?

4. Government Policies and Incentives

- Are there any government policies or incentives that support the development of affordable housing? If so, how effective are they?
- What changes or improvements in government policy would help increase the supply of affordable housing?

5. Sustainability and Quality

- How do you balance affordability with the quality and sustainability of housing?
- What measures do you take to ensure that affordable housing projects meet basic living standards?

A2.2. Guiding Questions for Provincial Government Officers

1. Housing Policy and Strategy

- What policies or strategies does the provincial government have in place to address the issue of affordable housing?
- How does the provincial government collaborate with developers and other stakeholders to promote affordable housing?

2. Regulatory and Zoning Issues

- How do zoning laws and building regulations in your province impact the development of affordable housing?
- Are there any specific regulations that you believe should be reformed to facilitate the construction of more affordable housing?

3. Government Support and Initiatives

- What initiatives has the provincial government undertaken to support low-income households in accessing affordable housing?
- How effective have these initiatives been in increasing access to affordable housing for the local population?

4. Urbanization and Housing Demand

- How is rapid urbanization in Phnom Penh and coastal provinces affecting housing demand and affordability?
- What steps is the provincial government taking to manage urban growth while ensuring housing remains affordable?

5. Collaboration with NGOs and Banks

- How does the provincial government collaborate with NGOs and financial institutions to address affordable housing challenges?
- What role do these partnerships play in the overall strategy for affordable housing development?

A2.3. Guiding Questions for Banks

1. Financing Affordable Housing

- What types of financial products or services does your bank offer to support affordable housing development?
- How accessible are these financial products to low-income households in Phnom Penh and coastal provinces?

2. Challenges in Financing

- What challenges does your bank face in providing financing for affordable housing projects?
- How do you assess the credit risk of low-income borrowers seeking housing loans?

3. Collaboration with Developers and NGOs

- How does your bank collaborate with developers and NGOs to promote affordable housing?
- What role does your bank play in financing public-private partnerships aimed at increasing affordable housing supply?

4. Government Support and Incentives

- Are there any government incentives or policies that encourage banks to finance affordable housing projects?
- How effective are these incentives in motivating financial institutions to support affordable housing?

5. Innovative Financing Solutions

- What innovative financing solutions is your bank exploring to make housing more affordable for low-income families?
- How does your bank address the challenge of ensuring affordability while maintaining profitability?

Annex 3: Interview Notes

A3.1 Provincial Governments

Koh Kong Province is characterized by an urban population of 58,460 as of 2019. For housing, people prefer to build their houses on their land. There is a high demand for rental room near workplaces. The rent cost between 30 – 50\$ per month. However, there are limited affordable housing projects available. Challenges in Koh Kong include construction costs that are 30% higher than in Phnom Penh and inadequate infrastructure such as electricity and water supply due to monopoly. Currently, the competition of the foreign workers who also need to reside nearby the workplace, which push Cambodian workers to move farther as some of them has bought plot of land and build (low-cost) houses to live with the lack of water and electricity. Real estate in Koh Kong also relies on Chinese investments in real estate, which makes the market vulnerable. Despite these issues, there are opportunities to address the high rental demand by developing low-cost housing targeted at factory workers and public servants.

Sihanouk (SNV) Province has an urban population of 248,080, making up 80% of its total population. The housing market is marked by high land prices, which is not feasible to build low-cost housing in the city, but there is and opportunities for constructing affordable housing projects about 20 km from the city, where people can commute to work by motorcycles as the land price at those area are still affordable. An official estimated that the land prices in the outskirts is still affordable ranking from 20 to 50\$ per square. It is important to note that workers of the SEZ rent the room nearby their workplace from Chinese landlords, and some of them rent the rooms in the neighborhood from the local people. Visiting the rental houses at the site, researchers noted that rental

rooms by the Chinese landlords have a better condition from the ones available from local people. Another issue is that Preah Sihanouk Province house a large number of slump dwellers who live nearby the railways, the hospital and other areas where they make their living on informal activities, and some cases prostitution. Locating them to the other places is very difficult as they make their living nearby their houses (slump house). Key challenges include high land prices, income instability, and the prevalence of unfinished buildings and unlicensed constructions. On the infrastructure front, the province boasts comprehensive systems including water, land, rail, and air, alongside 36 registered boreys. Opportunities exist for affordable housing development in areas like Ream, with planned surveys aimed at identifying viable locations. Target population for the affordable houses are factory workers and civil servants.

Kampot Province is the least urbanized among the four provinces, with an urban population of 61,597, accounting for only 11% of its total population. The real estate market is recovering post-COVID-19, with a need for affordable housing projects to support vulnerable groups like fishermen and public servants. However, high land prices and construction material costs remain significant challenges. Additionally, 400 families living along riverbanks are particularly vulnerable due to weak housing structures, which could be very dangerous for them and affect the beauty of the waterfront as Kompot is one of the most beautiful city destinations. Moving them from their current dwelling could affect their livelihood as they are making a living from fishing and they need to live next to the river, where they part their boat. In addition, land concession for veterans is a sad story as the plots of land are located far without supported infrastructure and the land allocated ends in the hands of other people. The approach of allocated concessional land should be revised. Kampot presents economic potential through projects like the Funan Canal, which could push the land price up.

There are no affordable housing projects in Kampot, but it would be a good opportunity to collaborate with the private sector to develop ones. One possibility is that the requirement from the top to the private sector to include affordable houses in their project with supports from the government. another option is the collaboration with the private sector and utilizing state-owned land for housing development could help address the housing shortage. This can be done at districts where the demand and opportunities for affordable housing are there.

Kep Province is one of the most populated cities, with very small population. Kep's urban population account for 33,999 (75% of the total population). People make their living from fishing, tourism and agriculture. People involving in fishing is the largest groups. Inside Kep city, their live slump dwellers, accounting for around 300 households. What is even worse is that some government officials who just moved in also live in the slumps due to their unaffordability to live in better houses. For real estates, there are some demands for leisure housing among outsiders. There have been a few Boreys in Kep and most of them have halted their operations due to very little or no demand. However, there is one in operation, but in the form of apartment and it is expensive. For those who do not

get their land from their parents, they prefer to buy plots of land and build their own houses rather than buying houses built by Borey.

People without proper housing or those owning those houses are slum dwellers and civil servants from outside. Kep has an eco-tourism development potential, so housing development in the form of affordable Borey poses a challenge. The province faces challenges such as the absence of state land for housing projects, high rental costs (ranging from \$300 to \$400 per month), and a nascent real estate market. Nevertheless, Kep has been improving its infrastructure, including road networks and eco-tourism projects, with water supply expansion also planned. Opportunities for affordable housing lie in areas like Chne Ankol and Phnom Vor, targeting public servants and newcomers. Another opportunity for Kep due to its endowment, Kep has the potential to build nursing home for elderly people. Target groups for affordable housing are workers who come from other provinces and the civil servants.

To address the housing challenges across these provinces, several recommendations have been identified. Developing affordable housing targeted at public servants, factory workers, and vulnerable groups is a priority, with an emphasis on quality and affordability. Regulatory improvements, such as implementing laws that require private developers to include affordable housing, are crucial. Investments in infrastructure to address issues like electricity and water supply will further support housing projects. Collaborative approaches with private sectors and NGOs can provide sustainable solutions, while specific focus areas like Ream in SNV, Phnom Vor in Kep, and Sre Ambil in Kampot should be prioritized for development. By addressing these challenges and leveraging available opportunities, these provinces can improve housing accessibility and support their unique urban and economic landscapes.

A3.2 Financial Institution

Koh Kong

ABA Bank

The bank evaluates customers' repaying capacity solely on their salary. Their remaining salary after deducting all the expenses divided by monthly repayment of mortgage loan must be greater than 1.5. The bank does not have any financing product to support the affordable housing. If customers' repaying capacity doesn't comply, the bank cannot provide the housing loan.

The fact that a bank asking house developer to repay the mortgage loan instead of home buyers as a condition to get the housing loan is not true at ABA Bank.

Current interest rate at ABA Bank is 7% if customers' conditions are good. If not, the interest rate is higher but, in some conditions, customers can get lower interest rates if their conditions are greater. If NBC sets the max ceiling of interest rate as 7%, banks have no choice but to follow the regulation. If government and house developer want to

cooperate with ABA Bank for this affordable housing project, the bank is welcome. However, the problem is, the bank only accepts hard title of real estate as collateral, and their repaying capacity evaluation depends solely on salary, and thus, most low income households do not comply to receive mortgage loan if the house price is high.

ACLEDA Bank

ACLEDA Bank has variety of criteria to evaluate customers' repaying capacity. Normally the maximum monthly payment of housing loan is between 40%-50% of the total salary, but they also evaluate other factors such as whether the house to be purchased using housing loan is developed by a trustworthy house developer, whether the customers really buy the house for their own living and not for investment (waiting for price rise to resell the house), and many other conditions.

The highest interest rate ACLEDA Bank is 0.95% per month which is around 11% per year. It is not possible for the bank to lower the interest rate to 6-7% to support affordable housing. The lowest interest rate they can give is at least 9%. The maximum year of loan can last up to 10 years only. Any modification to this guideline must be set and decided by the head quarter.

ACLEDA Bank hasn't disbursed housing loan to factory workers yet so far, while current non-performing loan (NPL) at the bank is 5.56%.

The best condition about ACLEDA Bank from other banks is, the bank has all the payroll account of government officials and workers at Special Economic Zone.

The bank is welcome to partner if the government cooperates with a trustworthy house developer to make the affordable housing work.

AMRET

AMRET only provides small housing loan, where they make the payment to the customers twice. Factory workers' small housing loan consist of around 30% of the total small housing loan. Maximum small housing loan amount is \$50,000, and it's mostly offered to businessmen. For factory workers, the bank provides at most \$10,000 loan. To evaluate the repaying capacity, the bank requires the submission of salary slip of at least the last 3 months, and employment ID card. Collateral is also required for loan with more than amount of 6 million riels.

NPL at AMRET is around 3-4% currently, while interest rate is between 0.75%-1.75% depending on the size of loans. The bigger the amount of loans is, the lower the interest rate is. The interest rate is a bit high because interest rate they pay for depositors is 7-8% already. Similar to ACLEDA Bank, the maximum duration of loans is 10 years.

Sihanouk Ville

Canadia Bank Prey Nub

The bank's interest rate is around 8%, while they evaluate repaying capacity based on 3Cs: 1. Collateral, 2. Capacity, 3. Characteristics such as credit history. Most housing loan there is used for self-house construction. The bank allows to take housing loan up to 25 years, but the loans disbursed are mostly 15-18 years. Loan loss is not really high as only 2 out of 200-300 loans become loan loss.

As there are many factories there, a few clients take housing loan to construct houses for rental to the factory workers. There are some room rental buildings constructed by Chinese investors, but they are mostly rented by Chinese workers, so Cambodian workers mostly live somewhere else and commute to work despite far distance from their workplace due to insufficient room rentals there.

ACELDA Bank

Similar to Koh Kong branch, ACLEDA bank has all the payroll account of government officials. However, for factory workers, the bank does not have all their payroll accounts like Koh Kong branch because factories in Sihanouk Ville do not use payroll service at the bank for their staff. Still, the bank has 3,000 payroll accounts of workers as female workers can get maternity support from the government. Total number of accounts is over 60,000, rising from pre-Covid with only 20,000 bank accounts.

The outstanding loan remains the same with the increase in small loan but decrease in housing loan, reflecting less demand in housing during the critical period. Maximum duration of housing loan is 15 years, while maximum interest rate is 18.5%. However, Sihanouk Ville branch mostly provides less than 13% interest rate. Non-performing loan (NPL) stays at 6-7%, but for housing loan, NPL is around 1% only. So far, the bank hasn't provided loan to house developer yet. Most housing loan seekers are migrants from other provinces, and the bank encourages them to seek housing loan from their hometown as the bank prioritizes to give the housing loans to people belonging to Sihanouk Ville only. Only if customers have verification of their stay in Sihanouk Ville from authority, they may be able to get the housing loan. Normally as long as customers meet at least 2 to 3Cs, the bank would disburse the loans. The Cs that the bank mostly prioritizes are Capacity, Collateral, and Characteristics.

The bank hasn't given housing loan to factory workers yet because what they are worried the most is the workers would resign from their career. Their career life is not sustainable.

The bank creates a new product called 'Clean Collateral', where borrowers are not required to have collateral to get a maximum of \$10,000 loan.

The housing rental price in Sihanouk Ville drops to only 10% of pre-Covid price. For example, a house used to be rented at \$20,000 monthly is now only \$2,000. Tourism

increases thanks to the launching of express way from Phnom Penh to Sihanouk Ville, but the increase is mostly on national tourists only.

Factories have been closed around 10% since before Covid-19.

Kep

AMRET MFI

There are a lot of loan issues and mostly on fishers. 50% of non-performing loans are on fishers. The issues might be due to decrease in seafood demands or due to insufficient sea lives, but to verify the exact causes, we need to interview the fishers. The second issue is with restaurants and hotels as the number of tourists becomes smaller. The other issues are on factory and casino workers. The number of factory workers is over 1,000. Their salary is between over \$200 to over \$300. The financial institution has given loans to them as well. Mostly they use the loan to construct or improve houses and to purchase motorbikes, and there never are customers taking housing loan to purchase house but the type of their career for taking credit is considered a risky one.

To evaluate loan repaying capacity, AMRET requires the loan seekers to have capital at least 20% of the total amount of the houses and evaluate loan seekers' capacity, collateral, characteristics. The institution also evaluates whether the loan seekers would really use the loans to their claimed purposes by comparing the amount they want to borrow and the purpose they claim to use for. The maximum loan duration is up to 10 years, but customers mostly take only 6-7 years. The higher the loan size is, the less interest rate it gets. For loan size of \$15,000 - \$20,000, the monthly interest rate is between 0.9-1.2%. Most housing loan the institution gives is only to salarymen.

The MFI has almost 10 accounts of loan losses on customers purchasing fake plots of land, equaling nearly \$100,000. A former credit officer borrowed various loans to invest in the fake plots of land. Because he used to be a credit officer, he knows how to fake credit purposes well.

To prevent losses on such fake investment in the future, all the financial institutions should restrict the loan conditions. NBC should standardize the loan repaying capacity evaluation conditions of all financial institutions altogether.

Interview with Mr. Soun Bophanna (070 637427)

Kampot

The case of Chea Saron, who sells fake plots of land, makes citizens in Kampot loses trust in real estate purchase, causing speculative fraud around Kampot.

A3.3 Developer Note

Koh Kong

Koh Kong faces a pressing demand for affordable housing, particularly for construction workers, factory workers, and civil servants. Developers like Soho Residence and MRN encounter significant challenges, including high material costs, limited banking support, and unaffordable housing prices for the target demographic. For instance, industrial workers earning \$10 per day can only afford homes priced below \$20,000, yet material and infrastructure costs make such pricing unfeasible. Post-COVID payment defaults and utility setup delays further exacerbate these challenges. Recommendations from developers include free utility installations, land concessions, and improved banking support through favorable loan terms and partnerships with developers.

Challenges		Soho Residence	MRN
Customer Affordability		Customers can only afford housing priced at \$20,000 or less if infrastructure costs are reduced.	Developers sell houses at \$45,000, which is higher than most local workers can afford. However, they are willing to support affordable housing projects if the government provides infrastructure support.
Material Costs		Expensive due to reliance on Phnom Penh suppliers.	Same issue as Soho Residence.
Banking Constraints		Developers face financial risks from loan guarantees; banks limit low-income families' access to loans.	Customer difficulty applying.
Utilities		Expensive, slow, and inefficient to apply for, adding significant costs to projects.	Same issue as Soho Residence.
Post-COVID Payment Defaults		Not applicable.	Significant issue: many customers have defaulted post-COVID-19.

Sihanoukville

Rapid economic development and foreign investments, especially from Chinese businesses, have significantly reshaped Sihanoukville’s real estate market. Developers such as Borey Lorn City Lotussea and Borey VIP cater primarily to mid-to-high-income buyers, with units ranging from \$60,000 to over \$300,000. Key challenges include high land and material costs, financing risks due to buyer defaults, and legal issues. Borey VIP, for instance, faces trust deficits due to past mismanagement, leading to stalled sales. Developers recommend regulatory support, tax reductions, and material cost interventions to stabilize the housing market.

Challenge	Borey Lorn City Lotussea	Borey VIP
Affordability	Units range from \$60,000–\$300,000, out of reach for most.	Reduced prices but trust issues hinder sales.
Financing	Loans provided directly by Borey; default risks persist.	Buyer defaults and legal disputes limit financial stability.
Land and Input Costs	High land and material costs inflate prices.	Not a major concern due to current low pricing.
Utility Costs	Expensive and slow, though manageable.	Not highlighted as a major issue.
Trust and Legal Issues	No significant trust issues.	Major trust deficit due to previous mismanagement.

Kampot

Kampot’s real estate market is influenced by its scenic location and proximity to Phnom Penh. Developers like Borey Golden Sea and Borey SK offer mid-range housing priced between \$50,000 and \$100,000, but affordability remains a significant barrier. Challenges include loan defaults, buyer distrust due to fraudulent developers, high material and land costs, and limited financing options. Many local buyers are excluded due to the lack of affordable housing and stringent banking requirements. Developers suggest partnerships with banks to improve access to financing and government measures to stabilize land prices and rebuild market trust.

Challenge	Borey Golden Sea	Borey SK
Affordability	High upfront costs exclude lower-income buyers.	Prices reduced to \$50,000 but still unaffordable for many.
Financing	In-house loan option provided but faces defaults.	No in-house loans; buyers struggle to obtain bank loans.
Distrust in Market	Affected by defaults but less than Borey SK.	Significant market distrust due to fraudulent companies.
Customer Base	Middle-income families (local workers).	Primarily emigrants buying for investment or holidays.
Unsold Units	Units held up due to defaulted payments.	30 out of 81 units remain unsold.
Material and Land Costs	Reliance on Phnom Penh increases costs.	Similar cost pressures on materials and land.

Kep Province

The housing market in Kep predominantly targets non-resident buyers, including emigrants and holiday homeowners. Borey TSPKep, for example, has seen limited interest from local buyers, who prefer to purchase land and build homes themselves due to cultural preferences and cost considerations. Units priced at \$28,000 to \$200,000 have failed to attract significant demand from local workers or civil servants. Challenges include loan defaults, misaligned pricing, and the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which have hindered project expansion. Developers emphasize the need for

affordable housing initiatives tailored to local needs and reduced construction costs to expand their buyer base.

Summary of Key Challenges:

- **Limited Interest from Local Buyers:** The majority of locals prefer purchasing land and building homes themselves, which is more cost-effective and customizable than buying pre-built units. There is a cultural preference in Kep for self-built housing, which diminishes demand for Borey-style projects among the local population.
- **Misaligned Pricing:** Units priced at \$28,000 were expected to attract local buyers, but there has been little interest. Prices in the range of \$100,000–\$200,000 target holiday homebuyers and investors, excluding low- and middle-income buyers, such as local workers or civil servants.
- **Impacts of COVID-19:** The project launched during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, which negatively impacted buyer confidence and purchasing power. Limited sales during this period have left the developer financially strained, particularly due to loan defaults by customers.
- **Loan Defaults:** Customers who financed their purchases through in-house loan programs failed to maintain repayment schedules. The inability to recover these loans has created cash flow issues for the developer and hindered further project development.
- **Lack of Affordable Housing Options:** While there is a potential demand for affordable housing among local workers and civil servants, developers have not prioritized this segment. High land and material costs have prevented the development of genuinely affordable housing units.

Common Challenges Across Provinces

Affordability Gaps: Developers struggle to offer housing within the financial reach of low-income groups due to high land, material, and infrastructure costs.

Financial Barriers: Limited banking support, stringent loan requirements, and high interest rates restrict access to housing finance for potential buyers.

Market Distrust: Fraudulent practices and defaults have led to a lack of buyer confidence in developers and the broader real estate market.

Utility and Infrastructure Issues: Slow and expensive utility setups add to the costs and delays of housing projects.

Recommendations

Policy Interventions: Government-led tax reductions, land concessions, and regulatory reforms to incentivize affordable housing projects.

Banking Support: Improved loan terms and partnerships between financial institutions and developers to facilitate access to affordable housing finance.

Market Stabilization: Initiatives to rebuild buyer trust, including housing developer certification programs and awards for reputable developers.

Infrastructure Development: Free or subsidized utility installations to lower project costs and accelerate development timelines.

Impact of Land Reforms in Cambodia

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Executive summary

The land reform in Cambodia in 1989 was a significant event in the country's history. The reform aimed to resolve disputes, ensure equitable distribution of land, and promote agricultural productivity as a means of economic development. It included measures such as land registration, land titling, and establishing land management institutions. This reform was a significant shift from the previous socialist regime's policies and laid the foundation for the 2001 Land Law, which aimed to strengthen land tenure security and land markets and prevent or resolve land disputes. The 1989 land reform marked a crucial step in recognizing private ownership rights, setting the stage for subsequent land policy developments in Cambodia.

Positive Impacts

Land reform in 1989 and later on in Cambodia had significant socio-economic impacts on the country. Those positive impacts can be summarized as follows:

Redistribution of Land: The implementation of land reform aimed to address the issue of land inequality by redistributing land from large landowners to landless peasants. This led to a more equitable distribution of agricultural resources across the country.

Agricultural Productivity: Land reform played a crucial role in boosting agricultural productivity. Providing land to landless peasants enabled them to have a stake in agriculture, leading to increased motivation and productivity in the farming sector.

Poverty Reduction: The redistribution of land contributed to poverty reduction by providing impoverished households with an opportunity to own and cultivate land. This allowed them to generate income, improve their livelihoods, and escape poverty.

Social Cohesion: Land reform promoted social cohesion and stability by addressing grievances related to land inequality. By providing equal access to land, it reduced social tensions and conflicts, fostering a more cohesive society.

Note: This policy research paper is the collaboration between the Ministry of land Management Urban Planning and Construction & National University of Management

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Investment and Economic Growth: The land reform created an environment conducive to investment in the agricultural sector. With increased land rights security, farmers were more willing to invest in their land, leading to increased agricultural production and contributing to economic growth.

Gender Equality: Land reform also aimed to address gender inequalities in land ownership. By providing land to both men and women, it contributed to empowering women, promoting gender equality, and enhancing women's economic participation.

Negative Impacts

Despite the positive impacts, land reform also faced challenges and limitations. Land reform in Cambodia has had several socio-economic negative impacts on the country.

Displacement of rural communities: One of the significant effects of land reform in Cambodia has been the forced displacement of rural communities from their ancestral lands. This has resulted in the loss of livelihoods and social disruption for thousands of families who heavily rely on agriculture for sustenance. Displaced communities often face difficulties in finding alternative means of income and struggle to adapt to unfamiliar urban or resettlement areas.

Inequitable distribution of land: Land reform in Cambodia has witnessed an uneven distribution of land among the population. Large-scale economic interests, including foreign investments and powerful elites, often acquire most of the redistributed land. As a result, marginalized and vulnerable groups such as small-scale farmers, indigenous communities, and landless peasants are left with limited access to productive land, exacerbating socio-economic inequalities.

Lack of tenure security: Many land reform initiatives in Cambodia lack proper mechanisms to ensure tenure security for land recipients. Land titles and ownership rights are often unclear, leading to land disputes and conflicts. The absence of a robust legal framework and transparent land administration contributes to an atmosphere of uncertainty, discouraging investments in land and hampering agricultural productivity.

Environmental degradation: In some cases, land reform has led to the unchecked exploitation of natural resources and environmental degradation. Commercial agribusiness ventures and land concessions, often a result of land reform policies, may prioritize profits over sustainability. This can result in deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and depletion of fertile soil, negatively impacting local ecosystems and the long-term viability of agriculture.

Impacts on food security: Land reform policies that prioritize large-scale agribusiness or speculative investments may prioritize cash-crop production over food crops essential for local consumption. This can lead to a decline in food security, especially for vulnerable populations. Additionally, reduced access to land and limited control over agricultural resources can hinder small-scale farmers' ability to secure sustainable livelihoods and contribute to overall food production.

Policy Recommendations

Secure Land Tenure Rights: Establish clear and enforceable land tenure rights for all citizens, including marginalized groups such as indigenous communities and small-scale farmers. This will foster confidence in the system and reduce conflicts and displacement.

Strengthen Land Registration and Administration: Invest in digitized land registration systems to ensure transparency, efficiency, and accuracy of land records. This will reduce land disputes and corruption and facilitate investments and economic growth.

Promote Equitable Land Redistribution: Implement a fair land redistribution program that prioritizes the needs of landless or land-poor farmers, ensuring they have access to productive land. Consider family-based or cooperative land management approaches to enhance productivity and social cohesion.

Enhance Land Use Planning: Develop comprehensive land use planning frameworks that consider ecological sustainability, agricultural productivity, and infrastructure development. Encourage multi-stakeholder participation to ensure fair representation and inclusivity.

Introduce Zoning Regulations: Establish clear zoning regulations to optimize land use in both urban and rural areas. Zoning can prevent uncontrolled land speculation, protect agricultural land, and designate specific areas for industrial, residential, and environmental conservation purposes. This would help balance development with environmental sustainability and ensure that land is utilized effectively while minimizing conflicts.

Strengthen Agricultural Support Systems: Provide necessary support to small-scale farmers in the form of improved access to credit, technical knowledge, irrigation facilities, and market linkages. This will enhance productivity, income generation, and food security.

Protect Environmental Sustainability: Enforce strict regulations on land use practices to prevent deforestation, soil degradation, and unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. Encourage the adoption of climate-smart agriculture techniques to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Ensure Social Safeguards: Implement comprehensive social safeguards to protect vulnerable populations affected by land reform. This includes providing compensation, alternative livelihood options, and access to basic services like healthcare and education.

Strengthen Legal and Judicial Institutions: Invest in capacity building and resources for legal and judicial institutions to ensure effective and timely resolution of land disputes. This will promote a sense of justice and confidence in the land reform process.

Foster Transparent Governance: Promote accountability, transparency, and citizen engagement in the land reform process. Establish mechanisms for public consultation, grievance redressal, and monitoring to ensure the fair implementation of policies.

Monitor and Evaluate Impact: Continuously monitor and evaluate the socio-economic and environmental impacts of land reform policies. Regular assessment will help identify any unintended consequences and enable policymakers to make necessary adjustments.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Cambodia underwent a land reform program in 1989, which aimed to redistribute land from the state to the poor and landless. The program was implemented by the government of the People's Republic of Kampuchea under the leadership of Samdech Decho Hun Sen, which was established after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime. The land reform program was part of a broader effort to rebuild the country after years of war and political turmoil. Cambodia's land reform in the 1980s is expected to have produced a significant impact on the country's economy, social structure, and political stability. Here are some of the perceived impacts of the land reform:

Redistribution of land: The land reform aimed to address the issue of land concentration by redistributing land to the landless or those with insufficient land. This led to around 1.2 million households receiving land titles, giving them secure tenure and access to agricultural land.

Agricultural productivity: The redistribution of land allowed previously landless farmers to have access to fertile land, leading to increased agricultural production. This helped improve food security and reduce poverty levels in rural areas.

Reduction in poverty: Land reform played a crucial role in poverty reduction, as it provided opportunities for the landless rural population to become self-sufficient and generate income. With improved access to land and increased agricultural production, many families were able to improve their living standards and escape poverty.

Political stability: The land reform program aimed to promote social equity and reduce inequality. By addressing land concentration and providing land ownership to the landless, it helped reduce social tensions and grievances related to land disputes, contributing to political stability in the country.

Economic growth: The redistribution of land and increased agricultural productivity, combined with other economic reforms, contributed to economic growth in Cambodia. The agricultural sector remains a significant contributor to the country's GDP, and the land reform played a crucial role in strengthening this sector.

Despite the enormous perceived benefits of this reform, little comprehensive literature has been written about it. This study aims to fill this gap by looking at the historical context, reviewing reform approaches, and evaluating the reform's impact, with the intention of building a good case study and providing a lesson learned for other developing countries.

1.2 Objectives

The objective of this study is to examine the impact of the land reform program in Cambodia from 1989. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Describe the background and context of the land reform program.
- Analyze the general approaches and basic principles of the land reform program.
- Assess the impact of the land reform program at the national and subnational levels

1.3 Methodology

The study will use a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data. The primary data sources will be:

- Desk review of existing documents
- Secondary data analysis
- Interviews with key informants, including government officials, civil society organizations, and community leaders.
- Focus group discussions with different stakeholders, including the poor, landless, wealthy, and powerful.

2. Historical Context (Since Pre-colonial Period)

Cambodia is a country situated in Southeast Asia, on the southern part of the Indochina peninsula. It covers an area of 181,035 square kilometres and shares borders with Thailand to the Northwest, Laos to the Northeast, and Vietnam to the East. On the fourth side, it faces the Gulf of Thailand.

The issue of land tenure is a central and contentious topic in the discourse surrounding Cambodia's socioeconomic development. Private land ownership rights have played a significant role in allowing farmers in the fertile lowlands to recover from the devastating effects of prolonged conflict. Conversely, the resource-rich uplands and border areas have witnessed large-scale land acquisitions for the purpose of cash crop production and extractive industries. The resultant displacement and land disputes have spilt over into urban and lowland areas, culminating in one of the highest rates of land inequality in the Asian region.

Land tenure and use information is essential for rural and agricultural development policies. Cambodia faces resource constraints in collecting and analyzing data. The agrarian systems in rural Cambodia revolve around land tenure arrangements, which include an agrarian structure and institutions. The agrarian structure primarily deals with the distribution of land ownership and operational land holdings (land use), while the

agrarian institutions are concerned with the social and economic aspects of land (property rights) and labor (contracts), and both are governed by informal and formal rules.

The creation and implementation of regulations that control ownership rights and agreements are part of the government's responsibility, as it has a significant role in determining the relationship between natural surroundings, the distribution of land and labor, technology, and markets. As time passes, the allotment and effective use of land are affected by fluctuations in current social, economic, and political patterns, as well as unexpected events such as wars and revolutions.³

The land tenure situation in Cambodia is complex and deeply rooted in the country's history.^{4 5} To understand land tenure in Cambodia in 1989, it is essential to consider the country's historical context. The policies that oversee land possession must also be viewed in the broader context of history.

Before Cambodia was colonized by the French in 1863, the King owned all the land in the country. The French introduced the concept of land ownership, which was maintained even after Cambodia gained independence.

Between 1975 and 1979, the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime of the Khmer Rouge took control and imposed policies that abolished private property. This led to a mass displacement of both urban and rural populations as they enforced collectivization. As a result, crucial documents, cadastral records, and maps were destroyed, individual rights were lost, and most professionals fled the country. This left Cambodia with the immense challenge of reconstructing its land tenure system from the ground up.

In 1989, the government summit admitted to the failure of collectivism and decided to open Cambodia's markets to the world. As a result of this decision, the state of Cambodia started re-issuing the suite of private rights in real estate that was created by the French. In April 1989, a land policy was introduced that affirmed the state's ownership of the country's land by default. It also granted Cambodian citizens the right to acquire private ownership of residential land and possess agricultural land privately.

The policies introduced ownership, possession, and concession rights for Cambodian citizens based on the size and use of their land. Ownership rights were granted for residential plots less than 2,000 square meters, possession rights for cultivated land less than 5 hectares, and concession rights for plantation land larger than 5 hectares. These rights were only available to citizens who had continuously used and cultivated their land for at least one year before the policies were promulgated and based on the family's ability to work in order to encourage rice production. Additionally, ownership rights were

³ <https://www.fao.org/3/a0306t/A0306T08.htm>

⁴ https://www.foncier-developpement.fr/wp-content/uploads/Country-profile-6_Cambodia_VF.pdf

⁵ <https://opendevdevelopmentcambodia.net/topics/land/>

granted to Cambodian citizens occupying houses or dwellings in Phnom Penh in 1989 to calm growing street unrest.⁶

While the allocation was intended to provide land to everyone who could work, it is unclear how many people were able to regain their original holdings as the distribution did not follow pre-existing ownership patterns. Hence, the denial of pre-1979 land rights in areas inhabited by indigenous communities caused immense hardship, as it disrupted their property regimes and affected relationships within and between the communities. Villages were often relocated from their traditional lands. For instance, the entire Bunong population of Mondulkiri Province was moved to Koh Niek to cultivate lowland rice.

In other areas of the country, despite the passing of time, the impact of the conflict with the Khmer Rouge until the 1990s still affected some villages, leading to their relocation to different lands to ensure their safety and prevent any possible alliances with the enemy. Unfortunately, this resulted in land and boundary disputes as rival villages attempted to sell disputed land to outsiders. Additionally, government officials were allocated land by provincial governors as a means of securing their employment, further exacerbating the situation.

Following the Paris Peace Agreement in 1991, which ended the Vietnamese occupation and established a market economy. In 1992, the Land Law acknowledged the reintroduction of private use rights, which had already become the dominant tenure system, based on the customary "land for the tiller" arrangements. The law also allowed possession rights of up to five hectares of forestland for those who cleared it.

With the enactment of the 1992 Land Law, people could apply for land certificates that confirmed occupancy and use rights. However, the law allowed only possession rights rather than ownership in rural areas. According to the Department of Cadastre and Geography, not more than 14 percent of the estimated 4.5 million applicants have received formal certificates of ownership since the early 1990s.⁷

In the areas where Indigenous communities practiced shifting cultivation, protecting their fallow (secondary forest) lands became a serious challenge. These communities could not assert ownership over these lands as their customary claims were not recognized, and they were also forced to rely on post-1979 5-year possession rights. Many people were displaced from their native land due to the imposition of administrative boundaries that often ignored traditional boundaries. This led to confusion and disputes over land ownership and usage rights.

Chapter Five of the 1992 Land Law allows for land concessions to be granted. The aim is to transfer state-owned land, including forests, to private companies to promote private

⁶ https://www.mrlg.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/The-Recognition-of-Customary-Tenure-in-Cambodia_FINAL.pdf

⁷ <https://www.fao.org/3/a0306t/A0306T08.htm>

enterprise, generate state revenue, and alleviate rural poverty. The concessions are of three types: economic land concessions, social concessions, and "others" not covered under the Land Law, such as mining, fishing, and port concessions. Economic land concessions (ELCs) are for commercial farming, and social concessions for residential construction or subsistence cultivation, while "others" are granted for different reasons.

Private land ownership was restored under the 1993 Constitution. Foreign experts have introduced legal transplants into Cambodia about land possession, use, and ownership in successive waves.

Among other difficulties, the cadastral System has been ill-equipped and under resourced to manage even modest workloads. In some parts of the country, security was also a significant factor, as fighting between the Khmer Rouge insurgents and government forces continued up until 1998. Government offices at the district and commune level, as well as village chiefs, were sometimes attacked, and in some cases, cadastral records were once again destroyed.

The Land Law of 2001, supported by the World Bank, created three primary land categories: State land, Collective property, and Private land. Since the Land Law was passed, the Cambodian government has been making progress in developing policy, regulatory, and administrative frameworks for land management.

It first created a registration system that made land ownership dependent exclusively on a central cadastral registry. The Law brought about some notable modifications to the customary tenure arrangements that were in place. These changes included formal registration of land ownership through systematic and sporadic land registration, recognition of communal land use by Indigenous communities, abolition of the ability to claim possession rights to land by clearing and claiming forest land, and establishment of a framework for the granting of ELCs and social land concessions (SLCs).

It also addressed the need for pro-poor land reform in Cambodia. The reform has two objectives: (1) to improve tenure security and land access through market-based land distributive reform and social land concessions, and (2) to stimulate investment for better agricultural productivity and diversity under the "economic concession" banner. However, implementing the Land Law involves contentious formalization processes of land property rights from state property, which include private and collective rights differentiation and public and private land differentiation. Concessions have been a central element of state land management in Cambodia despite the failures of the 1990s.

The Law also allows for the allotment of extensive land concessions to local and foreign investors. Land concessions come in three types: Social Land Concessions (SLCs), Economic Land Concessions (ELCs), and use, development, and exploitation concessions (UDECs). It's worth noting that UDECs are governed by a distinct law. It's good to know that a concession is a legal right granted by a contract with a competent authority that allows someone to occupy and use a specific piece of state or private land for a particular purpose.

Though the Constitution provides for private ownership of land in Cambodia, most of the land neither surveyed nor titled is still owned by the State, making it easier to grant concessions on such land. While communal land titles are acknowledged, applying for communal land tenure recognition is quite protracted due to various legal obstructions that have been set up. Those applying for such recognition must opt for private or indigenous recognition, as these two forms cannot be combined.

The Asian Development Bank made it a condition for a loan for agricultural development. The World Bank suggested that large-scale land investments be brought into the Cambodian countryside. This explains the focus of the Land Law on neo-liberal concepts of formalization of land holdings to encourage land markets and agricultural investment as part of a general commercialization of Cambodian agriculture. It can be said that the Law was primarily influenced by external factors and aimed at improving land administration for agricultural development. However, this approach may not have been entirely appropriate for Cambodia at the time, as most of the rural population relied on subsistence agriculture to combat food insecurity.

The government also created the Land Administration, Management and Distribution Program (LAMDP) in 2001, which the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction (MLMUPC) implemented. This program covers land registration, dispute resolution, land distribution, and land management policy. The social land concessions are a part of the land distribution pillar, which aims to distribute land with equity. The land management policy ensures the sustainable use of land and natural resources. However, progress under the land management pillar has been slow despite passing several regulations relating to land management issues.

In the meantime, the 2001 Land Law poses a problematic aspect of privatizing peasants' land property rights, which involves converting possession to inalienable ownership rights. According to the law, those who started occupying state land in open, peaceful, and continuous ways were considered as possessors. The possessor was entitled to ownership if the occupation lasted for at least five years. However, unlike previous Cambodian laws and practices, the 2001 law does not allow possession based on occupation that starts on or after the law's effective date. This means that the practice of clearing and temporary occupation that led to legal possession, which was permissible under the 1992 law, was discontinued under the 2001 land law. There are several reasons, including for the formalization of land rights, prevention of land conflicts, encouragement of proper land registration, protection of existing rights, and economic and environmental considerations.

At the start of 2002, the government, with the help of donors, initiated a comprehensive process to classify and register all land parcels based on the categories specified in the 2001 Land Law. This program aimed to eliminate any uncertainty regarding land ownership, which had been a cause of disputes and insecurity in terms of tenure. To tackle disputes that arose during the registration of land, a Cadastral Commission was established. The Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity, and Efficiency

in Cambodia included a pledge to enhance land distribution to the poor and issue titles to ensure legal ownership.

The 2007 Civil Code, sponsored by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency, raised questions about the exclusivity of the registry by stating that it only serves as presumptive evidence of ownership. The 2001 Land Law and the 2007 Civil Code are modeled on foreign legal frameworks that presuppose economic, technical, and professional resources that Cambodia lacks as a very poor and post-conflict country. Despite the efforts to reconcile the laws, implementation remains uneven and legal ambiguity persists. While it is too early to make conclusive judgments, the Cambodian experience questions the wisdom of top-down foreign intervention and the desirability of any form of centralized formal legal construction in a society without the necessary social, political, and institutional prerequisites.

In 2009, the government reaffirmed the significance of the three pillars in the Declaration on Land Policy.

In 2012, the Land Policy aimed to achieve several goals, which included strengthening the security of land tenure to ensure confidence and efficiency of land markets, guaranteeing the management, protection, and use of land and natural resources transparently and effectively to ensure equity of socio-economic development in both rural and urban areas, and maintaining environmental sustainability to prevent disputes over land use. Additionally, the policy provided a clear direction in the transparent and equitable distribution and use of state land for public and private purposes.

On 7 May 2012, the Prime Minister of Cambodia, Hun Sen, announced a halt to the allocation of Economic Land Concessions in the country. This decision was made through a document called "Measures to Strengthen and Enhance the Effectiveness of the Management of Economic Land Concessions (ELCs)", which is now commonly referred to as Order 01. Along with halting the allocation of ELCs, Order 01 also launched a land titling campaign that aimed to grant land rights to people and companies that overlapped with state land. Order 01 specifically targeted land within ELCs through private land titling. However, the actual implementation of Order 01 has been quite different, as the land adjudication areas have been expanded to include other land categories such as forest concessions, protected areas, and forest rehabilitation warrants from provincial authorities.

The government registration staff consisted of a total of 2,000 people, with 1,000 individuals from the Systematic Land Registration process and around 750 staff members from MLMUPC and other ministries. In 2015, young volunteers from 30 universities, institutes, public and private training centers, and three NGOs were recruited and sent to the field in 168 teams called Krom Niset to support the government staff. Each team comprised 12 government staff members, including representatives from the Ministry of

Interior, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, the Ministry of Environment, and other ministries, and up to 12 young volunteers. The presence of young people in supporting the titling process drew substantial media attention, and the initiative became known as the "Prime Minister Youths land titling campaign".

According to the available data, the Order 01 land titling initiative measured an area covering 1,010,429 hectares, with 92 percent (927,848 hectares) formally distributed to 317,444 families. The remaining 8 percent of the land has been reserved for future use. The initiative made significant progress within a year, compared to the Systematic Land Registration efforts, which only reached 625,000 families over the course of 10 years (from 2002 to 2012). The largest portion of land excised from state land (30 percent) came from un-categorized forest cover, while only 25 percent came from ELCs. It is worth noting that the dataset specifies a few other land categories where titles were issued that were not initially foreseen (Social Land Concessions). These results indicate that the Order 01 titling scheme was a comprehensive effort to address the problem of insecurity associated with irregular occupation of state land in the Cambodian uplands.

Implementing comprehensive land titling initiatives in the uplands can be perceived as a step towards commodification and privatization of the commons. These initiatives promote private property rights, which pose as an alternative property right in areas where collective arrangements of the commons have been established historically. Land titling has led to different reactions from communities to safeguard and preserve common property rights. Studies have indicated that introducing private land titles as substitutes for communal land titles in Northeast Cambodia has caused a division within communities, with some advocating for communal ownership while others prefer private land titles.

It is worth noting that the Cambodian government had reiterated its dedication to the White Paper on Land Policy and the National Strategic Development Plan 2014-2018 in its third phase of the Rectangular Strategy. These plans aim to enhance the legal framework for land management and land use, accelerate land registration and title issuance to improve land tenure security, promote transparency, efficiency, and sustainability in land use and management, and encourage land distribution through social land concessions.

By the end of April 2019, around 5.2 million land parcels were registered nationwide, accounting for 74% of the total 7 million land parcels. The Ministry has planned to achieve 100% nationwide land registration, including Indigenous communal land registration, by 2021.

3. Land Tenure Systems and Land Reform Policies in 1989

Despite efforts to reestablish formal land registration systems, the majority of land tenure in Cambodia in 1989 was based on informal, traditional practices. The land was primarily communally owned, with multiple households sharing the right to use and benefit from

the land resources. However, this informal system often lacked legal recognition, leading to increased vulnerability and conflicts over land ownership.

In response to prevailing land tenure issues, the Cambodian government implemented land reform policies in 1989. These policies aimed to formalize and strengthen land tenure, promote land redistribution, and enhance land productivity. The most notable initiatives included the Collective Farms Policy and the Sub-decree on Land Management (1989).

In 1989, Cambodia recognized private ownership rights over land. Cambodian citizens were granted the right to acquire private ownership of residential and agricultural land. The Government reintroduced private property rights through Instruction Number 3 and Sub-decree 25, which established ownership rights for residential land up to 2,000 square meters and possession rights for cultivated land of fewer than five hectares. Land was informally divided among villagers using various methods and criteria for distribution, with some villages recording the distribution outcomes by hand but such records were not always kept.

On 22 April 1989, a Sub-decree was issued in Cambodia, providing house ownership and confirming land rights for the population. According to Article 1, land for housing, buildings, and flats in the People's Republic of Kampuchea is the property of the people and is managed by the state in accordance with the law. Furthermore, no one can claim ownership rights that existed before 1979 over any housing land.

The state grants ownership to any Cambodian family residing in a house in the country's Commune or District. It is the responsibility of the commune and district to acknowledge this ownership. Any Cambodian family that resides in a house, separate house, or flat has the right to continuous ownership and occupation, allowing them to live there permanently.

House ownership can be passed down to heirs or relatives for indefinite use or management or transferred to any individual, provided their usage and management do not violate the law. The government prohibits foreigners from buying any land or houses for residential purposes.

A house owner is responsible for paying taxes on the land on which the house is located. In cases where multiple individuals own a house, the owners of the flats or portions of the house are jointly responsible for paying taxes on the shared or common areas according to their respective ownership percentages. The annual land tax shall not exceed 5% of the net salary earned by employees, civil servants, or armed forces members.

Residents who are heads of household and live in communes must apply for ownership of their residence through the commune or district. On the other hand, employees, armed forces, and workers should apply for ownership through their respective ministries,

departments, or entities, which will then send the application forms to the provincial municipal revolutionary people committee for further action. This committee is the competent entity to issue official certification to individuals.

In cases where people live in a residential house or land, they will have to purchase it from the state, except if they have built a house on it with their own money. In such cases, ownership will be granted to them. However, the provincial municipal People Revolutionary Committee may determine the policy in special circumstances. House fees will be determined based on areas, types, and conditions, and the Council of Ministers authorizes the provincial municipal people revolutionary committee to determine the fees based on the actual situation of each province/municipality.

It's important to note that those living in public buildings will not have any right to claim ownership of those buildings as they are meant for public use. House transferring or donation should be processed with a contract prepared by the buyer or transferee, which should then be registered in the land registry by paying 10% of the house value as residential houses, business offices, craft or industrial places.

Buildings or houses used for industrial purposes must pay tax to the state. The Council of Ministers will determine the amount of tax based on the size of the industry.

As house owners, it is their responsibility to keep the properties clean, hygienic and free from any bad smells or sound vibrations. Any necessary repairs should be carried out promptly to prevent such issues. Moreover, it is mandatory to obtain permission from the Provincial Municipal People Revolutionary Committee before carrying out any renovations or new constructions.

According to this sub-decree, the Provincial Municipal People Revolutionary Committee will have the responsibility of managing houses and buildings, as well as monitoring registration, ownership allocation, fees, and tax collection. They will also be responsible for maintaining public roads and drains and controlling noise within their jurisdiction. Any provisions that go against this sub-decree will be deemed null and void. The Council of Ministers, ministries, departments, and all Provincial Municipal People Revolutionary Committees have been tasked with carrying out this sub-decree.

On 03 June 1989, the instruction (Sechkdey Nainom) on implementing the Land Use and Management Policy was issued. Following the second country's official meeting in April 1989 on the Policy of Land Use and Management, the Council of Ministers instructed that the land of the state of Cambodia is the state property; the Cambodian citizens have full rights to possess and use land and have the right to inherit the land which was granted by the state for residence and business. No one may claim the right of the previous land ownership before 1979, and the state does not reshuffle and re-allocate land which has

been possessed from 7 January 1979 to the date of the instruction issues until there is a land law.⁸

The Government of the State of Cambodia (SOC) reintroduced private property rights through Instruction Number 3 and Sub-decree 25. The sub-decree established ownership rights for residential land up to 2,000 square meters and possession rights for cultivated land of fewer than five hectares, among other provisions.

Hence, for Land for Residence, families can receive ownership of residential land up to 2000 square meters by the decision of the chief of the municipal-provincial people committee. If a family already owns more than 2000 square meters of residential land, the extra land will be integrated into possession land. The temporary master plan of a locality will determine the allocation of land, roads, and reserved portions for future expansion. For Farming Land for Production-Business, Possession Land is granted to farmer families for the exclusive management and use of a rice field or farm for production, business, and heritage purposes.

The main difference between possession land and ownership land is that possession land is stable only during the use process, and after use, there is no more possession. On the other hand, land ownership is indefinitely stable, and even if it is not in use or business, it remains ownership, except for special cases under the law. There are no limitations on the use of possession land, and the area of possession land shall be limited to not exceed 5 hectares based on the available land in the location and the possibility of each family. To be granted possession of land, a family must have struggled with cultivation for at least one year before the specified date, and the district people's committee shall issue the title of possession of the possession land.

The government has determined that cultivation land for authority cashier support and village-commune people organization must be kept as reserved land. This is because each commune is allowed to keep a maximum of 6 hectares of farming land in any large area with less population. In a small area with a dense population, only 3 hectares of farming land may be kept. Similarly, each village may keep farming land from 1 to 2 hectares in any large area with less population, and only 1 hectare may be kept in a small area with a dense population.

If a village-commune has kept land exceeding the limited amount, the surplus will be distributed among the people. Furthermore, for newly cleared or ready-to-clear lands, permission must be obtained from the Ministry of Agriculture before the title of possession can be issued. This is to prevent any overlapping of the forestry and fishery boundary.

⁸ <https://chhoridalawbrary.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/ins-soc-03-89-land-use-policy-e.pdf>

Refugees, Cambodian returnees from abroad, and all persons who give up (ties to) enemy forces and come back to live with the people and revolution are entitled to receive residential lands, free farming lands, or newly cleared lands, depending on each location's ability.

Land can be granted to individuals in the form of concession, provided that the land area is at least 5 hectares. Concession is a right to possess and process a large area of land, in order to cultivate important crops for economic purposes. The concession land is only granted for a specific time period, based on the duration of each plant's growth cycle. After the first planting period expires, the rights can be granted for subsequent planting periods. The allocation of concession land is based on the availability and possibility for each family's location. The Minister of Agriculture is responsible for issuing the title of possession of concession land. Each family member has the right to possess and use the above three types of land. In cases where there is no land law in place, the State will issue a title of possession instead.

The conflicts on State land in Cambodia reflect a recent shift in the agricultural development model. In Cambodia, despite being at the forefront of agricultural development efforts, smallholder farmers have been increasingly subordinated and excluded by processes that favor foreign direct investment and large-scale agricultural modernization. Although the government has granted economic concessions to domestic and foreign companies for agro-industrial investments on apparently underdeveloped land, these concessions have often resulted in these companies encroaching on farmland or common pool resources already used by smallholder farmers, directly impacting their livelihoods. While the premise was that large-scale concessions would support national development and restore degraded land, the reality is that they have created competing claims to land between smallholder farmers and State authorities.⁹

It has been observed that land dispute resolution mechanisms in the past were often biased towards political powers and had high associated costs, which made it challenging for smallholder farmers to afford them. Additionally, the state's repression of social movements and intimidation of land rights activists has further limited people's opportunities to express their concerns and contest the decisions made by the authorities. However, despite these challenges, people have continued to strive towards protecting their land and livelihoods against the economic land concessions made by the state.

Land reform has the potential to significantly impact a country and its people. In many cases, land reform aims to address historical injustices by redistributing land to those who were previously dispossessed. This can have positive effects on economic growth, as it allows more people to participate in agriculture and other industries that rely on land ownership. Additionally, land reform can help to reduce poverty and inequality by providing opportunities for previously marginalized groups to become landowners and

⁹ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1868103419845520>

improve their economic prospects. However, land reform can also be a contentious and divisive issue, particularly in countries where land ownership is concentrated in the hands of a small elite. Poorly executed land reform programs can have negative consequences, including reduced productivity and economic growth, social unrest, and political instability. It is important to approach land reform with sensitivity and care, taking into account the needs and concerns of all stakeholders involved.

Hence, following the conclusion of World War II, Japan was characterized by a significant disparity in land distribution, consisting of a small group of large landowners and numerous tenant farmers. During the period of 1946 to 1950, the U.S. occupation authorities undertook land reforms aimed at redistributing land from the large landholders to the tenant farmers. These reformative measures encompassed the provision of low-interest loans to the new landholders and the advocacy of cooperative farming. Consequently, these reforms yielded a marked reduction in tenant farming and an increase in agricultural productivity and played a crucial role in stabilizing the rural economy. This stabilization, in turn, made a substantial contribution to Japan's rapid post-war economic recovery.

After the Korean War, South Korea experienced significant inequality in land distribution, as most agricultural land was controlled by large landowners. In the 1950s, a reform approach was implemented, known as the Tiller Program, which aimed to redistribute land from large landowners to tenant farmers. The government supported smallholders through measures such as providing credit, agricultural inputs, and technical assistance to new landowners. These reforms led to a substantial increase in agricultural productivity and rural incomes, contributing to the rapid economic development of South Korea.

Vietnam's land distribution system was previously highly centralized, with land ownership concentrated among a select few. However, since the 1980s, the government has pursued reforms aimed at decentralizing land management, allocating land to farmers, and providing long-term land use rights. The Doi Moi Economic Reforms of 1986 were instrumental in liberalizing the agricultural sector and enhancing land tenure security. These efforts yielded increased agricultural output, enhanced rural incomes, and contributed to the nation's overall economic development.

4. Impacts of Land Reform at the National Level

In the second half of the 1990s, a series of land reform policies were developed, leading up to the adoption of the 2001 land law and the establishment of the Land Management and Administration Project (LMAP) in 2002, with support from international donors such as the World Bank. The LMAP's primary focus was on systematic land registration (SLR), a compulsory program designed to formalize and legalize all informally held land. Following its launch, the project made significant strides, registering over one million

land parcels, mainly in rural areas. However, forced displacement of people in urban areas remains a persistent problem, with some victims of eviction filing complaints against the World Bank for its inadequate supervision of the project. The high-profile land issue in Cambodia remains unresolved due to the poor design of the LMAP project and its implementation by a personalized and politicized bureaucracy.¹⁰

Land tenure conflicts have been on the rise in Cambodia since the government shifted from collective to private land ownership in 1989. However, the absence of a central database makes it difficult to get an accurate picture of the extent of the problem. According to various sources, an estimated 1,310 cases of conflicts over land ownership were heard in court in 2001, making it the fourth most common lawsuit filed. A 2005 report by USADI revealed that over 1 percent of the Cambodian population, that is, 153,584 people, were affected by land conflicts. However, this figure is not comprehensive, as many people do not report their cases to the authorities or take them to court. In 2008, a government spokesperson estimated that around 3 percent of the population, that is, 420,000 people, had been affected by land conflicts.¹¹

Over 20 years, Cambodia has been plagued by a large number of land disputes and human rights violations that are connected to land rights. The expansion of extractive and agribusiness industries, especially in upland areas where migrant workers have occupied land traditionally used by local communities, is a significant factor behind these problems. Urban regions like Phnom Penh and the surrounding provinces, as well as both sides of Tonle Sap Lake, have also experienced a high number of land disputes.

Most of the land rights disputes are concentrated in conflict-prone areas of poor urban settlements, forest lands, and seasonal lakesides where people have different ways of claiming land rights. Claims to land ownership in these areas are usually based on three distinct types of claims. Firstly, people may claim land based on the long-established practice and social norm of clearing and using the land, which is widely accepted among rural Cambodians despite being illegal under the current land law. Secondly, land may be claimed based on evidence of purchases authorized or witnessed by the different levels of government empowered to authorize such transactions by previous regulatory regimes and practices. Lastly, land may be claimed based on legal provisions in the current land law, which is supposed to be the most secure type of claim as it connotes the backing of the state.¹²

¹⁰<https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/1bae406c-01ec-4552-be11-aef5bf9383ee/content>

¹¹ <https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/1bae406c-01ec-4552-be11-aef5bf9383ee/content>

¹² <https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/1bae406c-01ec-4552-be11-aef5bf9383ee/content>

Despite these challenges, people have tried to safeguard their land and livelihoods against the economic land concessions made by the State. The presence of competing claims leaves many people vulnerable to expropriation, particularly those whose claims rest on principles other than the legal provisions of the land law.

Land reform has a significant impact on a country and its people. It is important to understand how initiatives related to land reforms affect agriculture, rural development, economic growth, social equity, and more. By comprehending the dynamics of land reform, one can gain insights into the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead and develop strategies to create a more just and sustainable society.

Formalization of Land Ownership

The land reform policies sought to formalize land ownership by introducing land registration processes. While limited in scope, these efforts provided some legal recognition and protection to farmers' land rights, improving tenure security. Implementing land titling is an important element of land reform, as it is based on the idea that giving people inalienable private property rights can improve their security of tenure.

Land transfer, particularly in the 1990s, was not well regulated. Certain households could access land in the forest periphery of the village kept as reserved land by local authorities. Access to the peripheral land, usually in the forested or flooded commons, was possible through either the household's reclamation of land (secondary forestland) before the war or was contingent on good connections with commune and/or district authorities.

Starting in 2001, when the Land Law forbade the clearance of forestland was passed, the land was negotiated financially in certain cases with local authorities (virtually a land purchase). Nowadays, the intense land speculation by companies or individuals in respect of state land has made access to additional land through clearing more difficult. However, land access and ownership are still debatable. Especially those who owned the land before the 2001 Land Law have larger landholdings because the household had more active labour, and those later young householders acquired their land mainly through inheritance and usually from elders.

The land purchase and sale markets favor those who have amassed significant wealth. The ability of households to buy land seems to be contingent on their capacity to raise capital, with a strong correlation between total income and the total area of land purchased, among other wealth indicators. It is unfortunate that non-productive factors such as health issues, household expenses, and debt repayment often motivate land sales and that these sales are often driven by household vulnerability. This unregulated land market has resulted in the privatization of land and disconnected it from its social context.

The Land Management and Administration Project (LMAP) directed its titling efforts towards high-capacity areas in and around rural market centers, rice farming areas with stable land tenure, and developed transport and credit services. However, LMAP's titling

process was exclusionary, as it avoided targeting vulnerable groups who were at risk of eviction. The main challenge with systematic land registration lies in registering subsequent land transfers, which involves a complex and costly bureaucratic process that peasants are often hesitant to navigate.

Hence, articles 23-28 of the 2001 Land Law in Cambodia introduced the concept of ‘indigenous community property’ as a form of collective ownership. However, acquiring indigenous communal land titles is challenging and involves lengthy negotiations with three ministries and their respective line agencies. A lot of indigenous communities in Cambodia lack the resources and the legal expertise to engage successfully in this process. As of February 2016, only 11 indigenous communities (out of 166 that have filed an application) have received communal land titles, with support from international donors (CCHR, 2016). The program was largely bypassed by the fast-track individual titling that began in June 2012 under the so-called Order 01. Since then, no further donor funding has been allocated for this program, and the community land titling process has stalled.

In conclusion, the 1989 land reform in Cambodia had a significant impact on the formalization of land ownership by acknowledging private ownership rights and introducing new land laws. However, the country still faces challenges in implementing these reforms and ensuring equitable and sustainable land use.

Acknowledgment of private ownership rights the 1989 land reform marked a shift from collective to private ownership of land, acknowledging the private ownership rights of Cambodian citizens over certain types of land¹³.

Formation of the 2001 Land Law: This reform laid the foundation for the 2001 Land Law, which recognized three forms of land ownership: private ownership, state ownership, and collective ownership by indigenous communities¹⁴.

Increased land disputes: After the switch from collective to private ownership of land in 1989, land tenure conflicts began to emerge, leading to an increase in disputes and evictions¹⁵.

Progress in land management and administration: The 1989 land reform led to improvements in land management and administration, with the establishment of the Land Management and Administration Project (LMAP) to focus on land registration and title issuance¹⁶.

¹³ <https://opendevolucioncambodia.net/topics/land-policy-and-administration/>

¹⁴ <https://opendevolucioncambodia.net/topics/land-policy-and-administration/>

¹⁵ <https://www.fao.org/3/a0306t/A0306T08.htm>

¹⁶ <https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/1bae406c-01ec-4552-be11-aef5bf9383ee/content>

Ongoing challenges: Despite the progress made in land reform, Cambodia still faces significant challenges related to land disputes and evictions, indicating that the formalization of land ownership is an ongoing process.

Land Redistribution

Land redistribution programs were implemented to address inequalities by transferring land from large estate owners to smallholders. Although this led to a more equitable distribution of land in some areas, challenges such as inadequate resources, corruption, and lack of transparency hindered the success of these initiatives.

Land management reform in 1989 brought significant changes to land distribution policies. Under the new decision on land use and management, all land possessors were required to submit a possession-application form to the district office through the chief of the village and commune between June and December 1989. Possessors of land since 1979 were not subject to reshuffling or reallocation by the state. This policy encouraged people to comply with possession requirements, and land not claimed by the December 1989 deadline was considered free and open.¹⁷

Initially, it was believed that the land reform processes of 1989 had resulted in a fair degree of equity in land distribution to the people living in villages. However, evidence from the local level about a decade later proved that land distribution was unsatisfactory, leading to landlessness and inequality. For instance, people who returned from Cambodia-Thailand border camps after 1989 did not receive any land. The direct impact of land distribution between 1989 and 1998 exacerbated poverty for some Cambodian people, making their subsistence even more miserable. Although data on land inequality is inadequate for research, existing sources indicate a clear increase in land inequality, which disproportionately affects the rural poor. Such people are often forced to undertake hazardous forms of employment, such as migrant work, that compel them to move from one place to another, especially to urban areas.¹⁸

The private sector and local elites have a significant hold on Cambodia's land, controlling nearly 22% of the country through land leases for agro-industry, energy generation, and extractive industry. The bulk of these leases come from economic land concessions, which only generated \$5 million in government revenue in 2015. To address this, the government has taken steps to strengthen ELCs management and review existing concessions. As a result, over 1 million hectares of forest land leased by private companies have been returned to government control. Furthermore, at least 370,000

¹⁷ <https://phalthy.files.wordpress.com/2006/11/thesis-final-june-25-2007.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://phalthy.files.wordpress.com/2006/11/thesis-final-june-25-2007.pdf>

hectares have been removed from ELCs, and over 250,000 hectares have been taken from state-owned and seized forest land.

Land disputes have become a pressing issue in Cambodia despite the recent legal and institutional reforms on the management of ELCs and protected areas. Hence, the number of land disputes tripled in 2015, according to the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO) organization. However, the figures fell for 2016, with the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC) organization receiving 112 land dispute complaints involving 8,973 families in 2016, down from 182 cases affecting 16,679 families in the previous year. Land Management Minister Chea Sophara attributed the decline to land registration and dispute resolution efforts. Nevertheless, more than 500,000 people have been affected by land disputes cumulatively over time. The government has contested these figures, with Sar Sovan, secretary of state at the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction, stating that land conflicts are not a major problem in the 357 communes across the country in which land titling has taken place. However, land conflicts often result in eviction, with nearly 30,000 families being evicted from their homes in Phnom Penh alone in the last 25 years, according to NGOs. Large-scale land acquisition for agribusiness and contract farming are becoming driving forces behind growing inequality in land access, bringing new threats to secure land tenure.

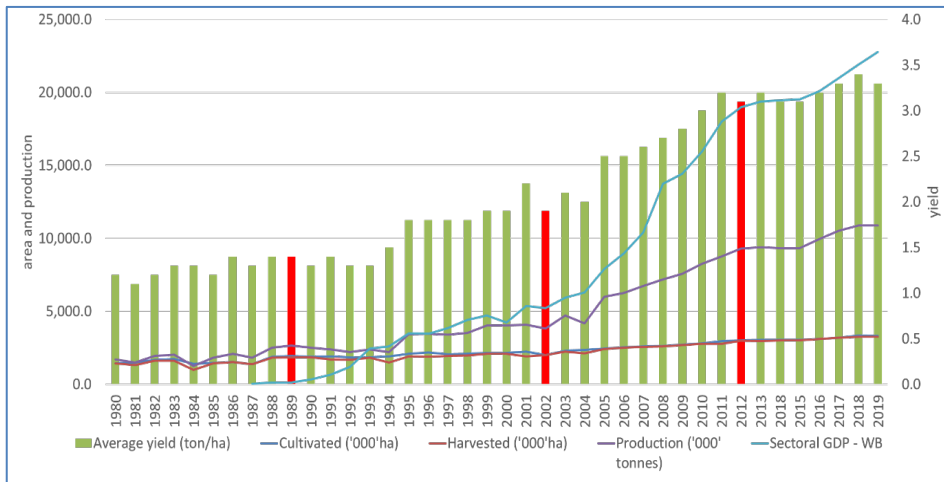
Social Land Concessions (SLCs) were introduced in 2003 to address landlessness and near landlessness. Under the SLC program, concession rights are very similar to possession, at least for the first five years. As many as 12,374 families were registered under the SLC program as of June 2014. However, the procedure and mechanisms of SLCs are time-consuming and there seems to be a lack of political will on the part of the government to implement a more ambitious SLC policy. The Land Allocation for Social and Economic Development (LASED) project faced problems such as insufficient quantity and quality of land to be distributed, lack of settling-in support, missing health and educational infrastructure, and overly long processes from land identification to land distribution.

Economic Land Concessions (ELCs) in Cambodia are granted for up to 99 years, up to 10,000 hectares, and allow the beneficiaries to clear land for agro-industrial purposes. However, other uses, such as clear-logging or tourism development, are also common. For the Cambodian government, ELCs represent an opportunity to revive the concessions economy and attract foreign investment. The legal framework for ELCs has evolved, and ELC contracts are subject to payment and must be developed within 12 months after issuance. Safeguards such as land use plans, resettlement solutions, and impact assessments must be conducted, and public consultations must be held with local authorities and residents. However, there is a lack of transparency in the attribution of ELC contracts, and the actual size and status of the concessions on the ground may differ

from the area specified in the contract. Some contracts have been terminated, but the cancellation procedure is inconsistent.

Agricultural Productivity

Figure 1: Impact of land Reform on Agricultural Production



Source: Authors' illustration based on data from different sources

The land reform techniques and to increase agricultural productivity by encouraging mechanization, introducing new techniques, and providing necessary support to farmers. However, the success of these efforts varied depending on the region and the implementation capacity of local authorities.

It is worth noting that agriculture is the primary occupation for many Cambodians, particularly those living in rural areas. As such, rice production is a major contributor to the country's economy, and it largely depends on arable land and irrigation systems. However, there are a number of economic, social, and environmental issues that need to be addressed in order to promote sustainable development in this sector.

Cambodia is currently undergoing a shift in its agricultural development model. The focus on smallholder farmers, which was central to agricultural development efforts in the 1980s and 1990s, has given way to a promotion of foreign direct investment and large-scale agricultural modernization. As part of this shift, the government has granted large economic concessions to both domestic and foreign companies for agro-industrial investments, with the understanding that these concessions would support national development, create employment opportunities in rural areas, and restore degraded land. However, companies that receive these concessions often encroach upon land that is already being used by smallholder farmers, resulting in direct impacts on their livelihoods. This has led to conflicts between smallholder farmers and State authorities over competing claims to land. It is important to investigate how these contradictions are being

addressed, as it could potentially reveal something about the nature of power and State formation processes in contemporary Cambodia.¹⁹

Most agricultural production in Cambodia is carried out by individual households, with 85 percent of households engaging in some form of agricultural activity in 2013. Additionally, 72 percent of households in Cambodia manage some form of an agricultural holding, covering a total land area of 3.1 million hectares. However, the average agricultural land size per household is relatively small, at just 1.6 hectares. Of those households with agricultural holdings, 73 percent engage in agriculture primarily for personal consumption needs. It is worth noting that as of 2011, 29 percent of households in Cambodia remained classified as agricultural landless. In Cambodia, the relationship between poverty and agricultural landlessness is deeply intertwined, as access to land is a critical factor for rural livelihoods. Addressing agricultural landlessness through land reform, equitable land distribution, and alternative livelihood programs is essential for poverty reduction efforts in Cambodia.

Reduction in poverty and social security

Land reform played a crucial role in poverty reduction, providing opportunities for the landless rural population to become self-sufficient and generate income. With improved access to land and increased agricultural production, many families could improve their living standards and escape poverty.

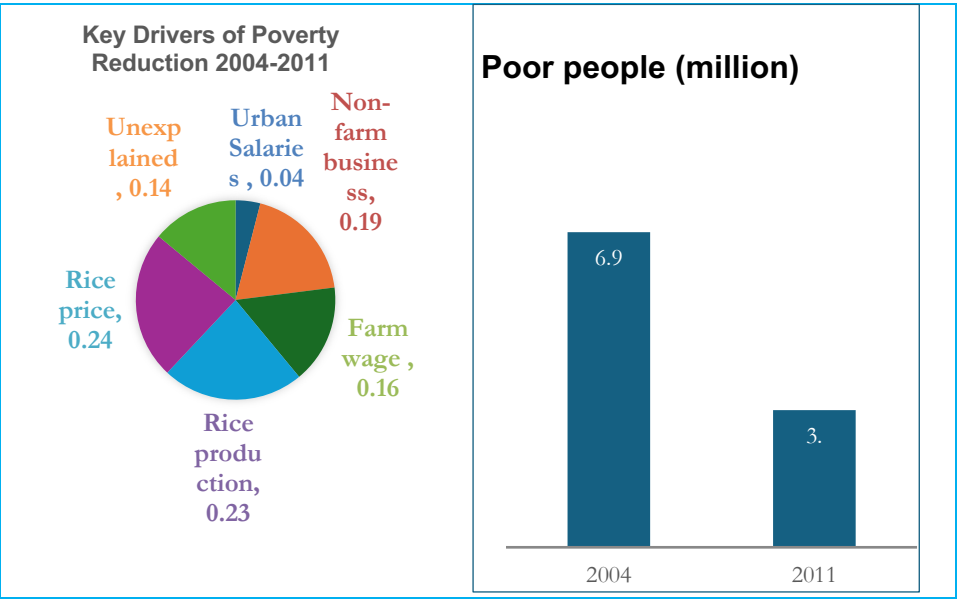
The previous efforts made towards land registration have raised concerns about arbitrary exclusions of communities, especially those living in high-value urban areas or near ELCs, who belong to low-income households. The Cadastral Commission, responsible for overseeing land registration, has faced significant challenges with bureaucracy and corruption, which has resulted in a slow pace of registration. These issues are attributed to limitations in law enforcement and irregularities in the implementation of existing legislation rather than the absence of policy.

The development of areas where many poor people live can often have a negative impact on their daily lives, leading to a loss of confidence in the government. Most of these areas are occupied by squatters who lack legitimate documents and can be easily intimidated by the authorities. Additionally, these areas are often owned by wealthy individuals who possess legal documents, such as titles of ownership, that allow them to legally evict the squatters. As a result, the development of these areas usually worsens the situation for the squatters, as they may be forced to move to other areas without proper infrastructure. This situation can lead to feelings of despair among the squatters, who may see the government as failing to improve their standard of living and exacerbating their already poor conditions. Eviction can be a particularly traumatic experience, leading to disconnection between family members and financial strain. Children may be forced to drop out of

¹⁹ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1868103419845520>

school if they cannot access it, and families may face food shortages and other difficulties due to the separation of their living arrangements.

Figure 2: Poverty Reduction from 2004 to 2011 and Its Drivers



Source: Authors’ illustration based on data from the World Bank

The wealthy landowners who own these squatter areas may also be affected by government orders, as the land has not been regulated firmly by the rule of law. Political leaders may use their power to benefit themselves, leading to a lack of trust in governmental institutions. Although laws and regulations exist in Cambodia, their effectiveness largely depends on the implementation by the competent authorities. However, these authorities may sometimes make decisions that favor powerful individuals or political issues, leading to a lack of trust in the justice system. This situation can leave the poor feeling hopeless and without access to justice.

On May 28, 2006, the Prime Minister announced his intention to revoke certain decisions made by local cadastral authorities and provincial/municipal administrations regarding the allocation of land ownership to wealthy or influential individuals. While this was a positive step toward addressing land management issues, the matter of holding the relevant authorities accountable for improper issuance of land titles was not fully addressed. This reflects broader challenges within Cambodia's political landscape, where the enforcement of the rule of law remains an area for continued improvement.²⁰

²⁰ <https://phalthy.files.wordpress.com/2006/11/thesis-final-june-25-2007.pdf>

Although the 2001 Land Law recognizes the right to possession until August 30, 2001, legal protection for poor squatters is still limited. The lack of legal documents to prove ownership is a major disadvantage for the poor, who do not have the knowledge or financial resources to protect their property rights. In contrast, the rich pay more attention to legal documents to protect their property rights, leaving the poor more vulnerable. The absence of a land tax also exacerbates the problem, as it fails to encourage landowners to invest in or make use of their land and gives squatters an opportunity to settle on empty land. This trend causes local authorities to have less responsibility for land management in their territory, while the chaotic resettlement movement from vacant plots of land is difficult to stop.²¹

The 2001 Land Law in Cambodia faces limitations in addressing land speculation, which has contributed to the growing issue of land fragmentation. Under free-market conditions, poorer landholders are often compelled to sell their land to speculators, who are aware of upcoming government-led development projects. This trend increases the number of landless individuals, which in turn places pressure on the government to address their needs, such as through housing provision or welfare support. However, any substantial government intervention in land markets, such as sudden policy changes or restrictions, could inadvertently affect the rural poor by limiting their ability to sell land when needed for financial survival.

Wealthy individuals, with the capacity to acquire large tracts of land and secure land titles with relative ease, have contributed to land speculation. This raises the question of whether the government should intervene to limit the buying and selling of land, potentially by introducing measures that restrict speculative transactions. One possibility could be the implementation of regulations similar to insider trading rules, requiring a waiting period before those with knowledge of development plans can engage in land transactions, thereby reducing speculative activities.

The broader social impacts of landlessness, such as food insecurity, can hinder national development. When families lose access to land, their ability to sustain themselves through agriculture diminishes, which can exacerbate poverty, lower educational outcomes, and create a cycle of socio-economic challenges that impede the country's overall growth. Therefore, addressing land speculation is crucial not only for stabilizing land ownership but also for fostering sustainable development across multiple sectors.

Political stability

The land reform program aimed to promote social equity and reduce inequality. Addressing land concentration and providing land ownership to the landless helped

²¹ <https://phalthy.files.wordpress.com/2006/11/thesis-final-june-25-2007.pdf>

reduce social tensions and grievances related to land disputes. This contributed to political stability in the country.

The issue of inaccurate land management is a serious concern as it erodes public trust in the government's institutions. The efficacy of implementing laws and regulations is heavily reliant on the competence of government agencies. However, in Cambodia, the authorities often decide cases in favor of individuals who may benefit them, which undermines the credibility of the legal system. In cases that involve political issues or powerful individuals, local authorities may be hesitant to make decisions and may instead refer the case to higher authorities or even the Prime Minister.²²

With rising demand for land due to Cambodia's integration into the global economy, land has become a valuable resource that replaces the diminished forest. However, poorly demarcated and managed state land allows for the expropriation of land through legal instruments. The country's political instability, including the civil war and political dilemmas, has resulted in an improper implementation of land laws and regulations. The ruling party's intervention in land disputes can exacerbate the legal system, making it more likely for land disputes to depend on political leaders for resolution. This has resulted in many people suffering from the improper implementation of laws and regulations.²³

Land and related policy and law reform in Cambodia have been influenced by diverse interests within the bureaucracy and government apparatus, state-linked business elites, donor agencies, and civil society. This has resulted in significant tension between policies that aim to attract foreign investment through large-scale concessions and the protection of land rights for smallholder farmers and indigenous people. Additionally, there has been tension between formal legal commitments to land formalization through individual and communal land titling and a lack of government commitment to a transparent process of state land (re)classification and mapping.

Unfortunately, since the passing of Cambodia's Land Law in 2001, there has been an increase in the number of Cambodian citizens who face land tenure insecurity, forced evictions, land-grabbing, and other violations of the land laws. While systematic land titling has made significant progress in issuing land titles in the agricultural lowlands areas where land is not disputed, most people in the rural uplands have not been able to register for land titles or have been excluded from these rights. The process of state land classification has worked by default, with the granting of economic concessions being the trigger for the reclassification of state-public land to state-private land. Meanwhile, the government has de-prioritized allocating state land to Social Land Concessions (SLCs), rendering the key redistributive mechanism for the landless and land-poor ineffective.

²² <https://phalthy.files.wordpress.com/2006/11/thesis-final-june-25-2007.pdf>

²³ <https://phalthy.files.wordpress.com/2006/11/thesis-final-june-25-2007.pdf>

Order 01 introduced a new element to Cambodia's land reform process. It included a moratorium on Economic Land Concessions (ELCs) and a land titling campaign to fast-track private land registration on forest land and other state land targeting areas with land disputes. Farming households previously branded as "illegal settlers", including those inside ELCs and in Protected Areas, suddenly became eligible – and many received– full property title through "donation." This dramatic change in policy direction and the speed at which it was implemented in 2012-2013 took many by surprise. Recent government initiatives amounted to recognition that something had gone wrong and that the land crisis had begun to threaten the country's stability.

Modifications in the system are more likely to be politically driven than to reflect a long-term strategy for reversing current land and developmental inequalities. On the other hand, Order 01 also provided new possibilities for some communities under certain contexts to advocate for the formal recognition of their land through titles.

For the private sector, domestic companies have had little impetus for more accountable and transparent land governance. More reform-minded domestic and foreign companies may want to see improvements in resolving Cambodia's land conflicts and a more streamlined process for approving and obtaining land concessions. Conflicts with local communities and allegations of illegal land grabs can pose significant risks to investors and increase their exposure to judicial claims.²⁴

Economic growth

The redistribution of land and increased agricultural productivity, combined with other economic reforms, contributed to increased Foreign Direct Investment and to economic growth in Cambodia. The agricultural sector remains a significant contributor to the country's GDP, and the land reform played a crucial role in strengthening this sector.

Cambodia, with 84% of the population living in rural areas, has faced significant land issues in recent decades, leading to landlessness and inequality. Speculative land causes extreme imbalances in resource allocation, with influential people and civil servants using their knowledge of the law to acquire land ownership at the expense of the poor. A recurrent land dispute over titling has resulted in a serious destruction of the livelihood of the poor. Speculative land is also a rudimentary cause of poverty and income inequality, with unequal access to land acquisition leading to a large gap between the rich and poor.

²⁴https://www.mekonglandforum.org/sites/default/files/Political_Economy_of_Land_Governance_in_Cambodia_FA.pdf

Table 1: Foreign Direct Investment in Agriculture Sector from 1994-2017

SUBSECTOR	PROJECTS	FIXED ASSETS (US \$)	% OF FIXED ASSETS
Agro-Industry	98	3,537,035,284	58.0%
Rubber Plantation	67	1,643,469,505	26.9%
Rice mill	27	551,735,783	9.0%
Plantation (other)	41	212,052,208	3.5%
Other	10	95,220,556	1.6%
Animal Farming	9	48,313,940	0.8%
Flour	3	6,641,400	0.1%
Fishery	1	4,951,325	0.1%
Tobacco	1	2,164,800	0.0%
Total	257	6,101,584,801	100%

Source: The Council for the Development of Cambodia. (2018). Analysis of Capital by Sector Approved from 01.08.1994 to 31.12.2018

TABLE 2 Cambodia / Macro Poverty Outlook Indicat (annual percent change unless Indicated otherwise)

	2019	2020	2021	2022e	2023f	2024f
Real GDP growth, at constant market prices	7.1	-3.1	3.0	4.8	5.2	6.3
Private Consumption	7.0	-0.8	10.9	-8.3	1.2	2.1
Government Consumption	10.0	12.5	-24.1	4.0	12.0	17.8
Gross Fixed Capital Investment	6.9	11.2	35.0	-11.5	-0.2	14.7
Exports, Goods and Services	7.8	1.1	2.9	16.5	12.6	12.3
Imports, Goods and Services	6.0	7.3	48.7	1.2	6.5	9.3
Real GDP growth, at constant factor prices	6.8	-3.1	2.8	4.3	5.2	6.3
Agriculture	-0.5	0.4	1.1	1.3	1.5	1.5
Industry	11.3	-1.4	7.4	8.6	9.1	9.2
Services	6.2	-6.2	-1.0	0.9	2.6	4.9
Inflation (Consumer Price Index)	1.9	2.9	2.8	6.0	4.2	3.8
Current Account Balance (% of GDP)	-15.2	-12.4	-41.9	-25.0	-15.5	-12.5
Net Foreign Direct Investment Inflow (% of GDP)	13.2	13.5	12.4	12.4	13.0	14.2
Fiscal Balance (% of GDP)	1.5	-4.9	-6.7	-5.8	-5.4	-4.4
Debt (% of GDP)	28.2	36.1	35.3	35.1	35.1	35.7
Primary Balance (% of GDP)	1.9	-4.3	-6.1	-5.2	-4.8	-3.8
GHG emissions growth (mtCO2e)	1.9	-1.3	-0.4	1.7	2.5	3.3
Energy related GHG emissions (% of total)	19.3	18.5	18.3	19.4	20.9	22.8

Source: World Bank, Poverty & Equity and Macroeconomics, Trade & Investment Global Practices. Emission data sourced from CATT and OECD

Notes: e = estimate , f = forecast.

The growth of land speculation has a significant impact on economic development, with an increase in titleholders leading to more landless people. There is no restriction on the selling of land, leading to new landowners buying land and waiting for high market prices without improving land use conditions. This has a serious impact on land productivity, making it difficult for an agricultural country to improve its economic growth through

agriculture. Land inequality, resulting from a defect in law, is a serious impediment to economic development.²⁵

The Land Law of 2002 was enacted to acknowledge the need for a stronger land tenure system, as well as improved land management and administration, to drive economic and social development in Cambodia. The law identifies three types of land ownership: state public property (such as forests and protected areas) for resource conservation, state private property for economic and social development, and private property (such as residential or agricultural land). Private ownership, in turn, can take the form of individual, communal, undivided, or co-ownership.²⁶

5. IMPACT OF LAND REFORM AT THE SUB-NATIONAL LEVEL

This section delves into the sub-national impact of land reform, specifically through detailed interviews with key stakeholders in the coastal provinces of Kampot and Kep. These interviews were meticulously conducted to gather nuanced insights from those directly involved in or affected by the land reforms. The choice of Kampot and Kep for this study was strategic, emphasizing the importance of recent qualitative evidence to complement and enhance the national-level findings, which were based on comparatively older and potentially less representative secondary data. The qualitative research in these provinces aimed to capture the contemporary experiences and perspectives of local stakeholders, providing a more granular and current understanding of land reform impacts. This approach ensures a robust comparison and a richer overall analysis by integrating fresh, primary data with secondary sources. This research initiative was carried out by a dedicated group of students who received expert guidance and supervision from the authors.²⁷

Kampot Province

Covering an area of approximately 4,873 km² with a population nearing 720,000, Kampot boasts a diverse landscape that includes potential tourist attractions, coastal regions, industrial zones, and mountainous terrain. In partnership with the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the administration of Kampot has registered land rights titles for the province's two towns, achieving an 80% registration rate for the land used in the province, equivalent to 660,000 land titles. The completion of the remaining 20% is projected for 2025.

The land reform program in Kampot has markedly influenced its residents and overall development. The formalization of land ownership enables residents to leverage their land

²⁵ <https://phalmy.files.wordpress.com/2006/11/thesis-final-june-25-2007.pdf>

²⁶ <https://www.fao.org/3/a0306t/A0306T08.htm>

²⁷ The collaboration between students and the authors underscores a commitment to academic mentorship and the cultivation of research skills among emerging scholars. Students from National University of Management involves in this study includes Mr. Ren RithyDen, Ms. Rith Somaly, Ms. Manh Pisal, Ms. Kim Sophors, Mr. Siv HengSrun, and Ms. Chhum Sochana.

assets by either selling them or using them as collateral for loans to finance business ventures. Furthermore, the program facilitates agricultural diversification, allowing for the cultivation of mixed and new crops that meet market demands. Notably, land conflicts among residents have decreased by 85 percent to 90 percent, with most disputes occurring between residents and large companies, and a minority among villagers. The industrial zone in Kampot benefits from six cement factories and five international ports, enhancing both national and international trade activities.

Despite these successes, the land reform program faces several challenges. A significant number of residents have relocated, complicating efforts to complete land title registrations. Additionally, the registration process can incite conflicts among neighbors. Furthermore, some residents occupy public land, claiming it as private property, while others struggle with understanding the new land measurement systems. The slow pace of the land reform's implementation is partly due to limited collaboration from beneficiaries, a situation exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has imposed additional constraints.

Since 2019, Kampot's administration has been addressing these challenges by accelerating the registration process using QR codes for systematic titles, transitioning from certificates of land use rights, soft titles, and white titles, which are typically sporadic. To mitigate land conflicts, governors prefer resolving issues locally rather than resorting to judicial proceedings.

In summary, the land reform program in Kampot has been largely successful, empowering residents to make more efficient use of their land while playing a key role in the development of the tourism sector and contributing to overall provincial growth. However, it's important to recognize that the presence of ports and industrial zones has also significantly influenced this success. Introducing zoning regulations might be a valuable recommendation to further optimize land use in the region.

Kep Province

Kep, known initially as Krong Kep Bokor and established in 1994, spans 336 km² and has a population of approximately 45,000. It includes 12 islands and a 5,000-hectare national park. Notably, Kep was the first province in Cambodia to become mine-free in February 2002. The province's city is strategically built along the seaside.

Between 1989 and 1992, Cambodia experienced four phases of land distribution, with the initial phase forming "production solidarity groups" (Krom Samakki Bongko Kongkaeun Phol). However, this phase was disrupted by the invasion of the Khmer Rouge fraction, particularly around Phnom Vor during 1991-1992. During this period, the government continued land registration for residents, issuing "soft titles" granted by city or district governors to transfer possessory rights over unregistered property. This land distribution process, however, led to conflicts between residents and authorities, as the new land distribution maps were not aligned with resident expectations.

In 2001, under Anokrat 46 and 48 of the land law and with UNESCO's support, the government received the authority to distribute land at the village level. Consequently, 270 hectares and 900 hectares of land were distributed to residents on May 5, 2012. The government aims to complete land registration by 2022 and resolve all conflicts by 2023.

Post-land reform, the positive impacts were significant. The clearance of mines in 2000 enhanced living conditions and livelihoods, enabling residents to sell and own land without conflicts. The decrease in land tenure conflicts fostered societal peace and equality, encouraging effective land use and increased agricultural production. The governor designated Phnom Kon Seak and Phnom Vor for vegetable cultivation, contributing to the rise of agrotourism and attracting more visitors. Infrastructure developments, such as roads and ports, were also facilitated.

However, land reform has also introduced certain challenges. Some residents face restrictions in fully utilizing their land due to specific area-based land use limitations. For instance, the National Park for Biodiversity has experienced a significant reduction in size, from 5,000 hectares to 981 hectares, partly as a result of unauthorized land encroachments by individuals seeking to claim or utilize land within protected areas. Additionally, land speculation has become an issue, with some parcels being purchased with no immediate plans for development, leaving them unused and hindering potential growth. On a positive note, the limited industrial development and absence of widespread land concessions have helped to preserve the environment, maintaining the ecological balance in certain areas.

Several ongoing challenges continue to impact land reform efforts. Land tenure conflicts, arising from discrepancies between the 2001 and 2007 land laws, still affect a small number of families. While the issue currently impacts seven families, it represents a broader challenge of resolving such disputes, which is expected to continue until 2024. Efforts to address this are ongoing, but a definitive resolution has yet to be reached.

In addition, many properties owned by wealthier residents remain undeveloped. Between 2006 and 2009, local governors encouraged land development, but participation was limited due to residents' lack of understanding of the government's goals. The primary livelihoods of many residents, such as fishing and selling goods, have also made it difficult to implement clear land occupation strategies.

The development of tourism infrastructure, particularly in areas like Koh Tonsay, has been hampered by a shortage of skilled human resources and limited financial support. Despite efforts to secure funding from benefactors and international sources, such as from France, financial backing remains a challenge, delaying progress in tourism and accommodation development.

Despite these challenges, the four phases of land reform in Kep have contributed to economic growth through enabling land transactions, increasing agricultural production, and promoting agrotourism. While specific data would provide more clarity on the contributions of each factor, the overall impact has been positive. Infrastructure

improvements have fostered a more peaceful and equitable society, though land utilization remains constrained by area-specific factors and varying levels of resident participation.

The provincial government plans to complete the registration of approximately 7 million land titles (with each family holding around 3-4 titles) by 2025. To mitigate land tenure conflicts, a mini project launched in 2019 involves a dedicated team working closely with villagers to align with government land ownership policies. This initiative aims to support residents in registering their land, helping to secure their rights and reduce future disputes.

6. EMERGING CHALLENGES

The land reform policies also faced challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, limited technical knowledge and human resources due to migrations, and a lack of effective dispute-resolution mechanisms. These challenges further contributed to land tenure conflicts, undermining the reform's intended goals.

Cambodia has been making progress in the development of its land reform agenda. The MLMUPC has set up strong mechanisms for systematic land registration, indigenous land registration, and social land concessions, among others. However, the full implementation of these mechanisms remains a challenge. Other frameworks for state land management have been developed but are still not consistently implemented. Land disputes and evictions continue to be a significant problem in Cambodia. While the government has made significant progress in developing policies and frameworks for land, it still has some way to go to achieve its objectives.²⁸

The government's land policy strategy framework (Royal Government of Cambodia 2002b) aims to create a state land inventory and classification system that can protect areas of public interest and maximize the benefit that the state gets from the sale, lease, and concession or possession rights of land in the private domain. However, the notion of "benefit to the state" is complex and subject to different and contradictory interpretations, making this a central debate in contemporary land reform.

A sub-decree outlines the mechanisms for state land management and classification (Royal Government of Cambodia 2005c), but in reality, it has only proceeded marginally due to a lack of government commitment and resources for state land mapping and classification. The process of state land classification and mapping seems to work by default through the granting of economic concessions and by occasionally granting Social Land Concessions and community entitlements.

²⁸ <https://opendevelopmentcambodia.net/topics/land-policy-and-administration/#ref-73683-2>

The inefficiency of state land management is also due to the absence of a sound and multi-level integrated land use planning system that would develop, organize, and protect the entire territory through integrative and strategic territorial planning mechanisms.

In areas where land use is changing, such as when agricultural land is converted to commercial or industrial uses, rival claimants may produce different kinds of documentation to legitimize their claim due to the absence of clear administrative roles and legal procedures and the lack of accurate and well-organized land tenure data. Despite the presence of a formal land-governance institution regulated by the state, most land holdings remain outside state regulation. Many rural families lack secure title or ownership of their land, and most people hold land without appropriate documentation. The land law and contract decree No. 38, or the "Law Referring to Contract and Other Liabilities," recognizes the first person who registered the land as the legal owner.

Forced transactions are a source of tenure insecurity, as powerful individuals such as tycoons and government officials may force landowners to sell their land at an offered price determined by the buyer. This is often the case before the development of new infrastructure when speculators buy up large tracts of land in anticipation of a high return once the infrastructure is in place.

When conflicts arise over land ownership, the courts have the power to decide who the legal owner is. However, the Cambodian courts are highly politicized and corrupt, leaving the poor with no place to seek legal remedy. In urban areas, the state expropriates land for private housing development, while in rural areas, land is taken for agro-industrial development. Both types of development involve the government's expropriation of large land areas for the benefit of private companies, often through dubious means.

Land titling and promotion of land markets in the lowland regions contradict the historically established institutions of peasants, leading to private enclosure of land and disembodiment from its social fabric. In the uplands, land reforms have been implemented in the context of the post-war political economy fueled by the extraction of natural resources. The state's allocation of forest and agro-industrial concessions has undermined the security of peasants' land tenure. The existing state land management instruments are not robust enough to address power imbalances in the upland areas. The processes of land rights formalization in lowland and upland areas are not articulated, leading to new forms of land tenure fragmentation. Greater attention should be given to articulating different land tenure regimes that bring peasant movements and migration back to the center of the debate to ensure more secure land access for peasants.

In Cambodia, the government's ability to collect and use information about land tenure, land use, and production has been severely impacted by years of war and civil conflict. The country faces significant constraints in terms of human resource capacity and

financial resources for data collection, making it challenging to provide secure land tenure for farming households and manage state land resources effectively.

It is crucial to have a well-organized and maintained land tenure database to safeguard individuals' ownership and contractual use rights in rural and urban areas. Secure land tenure promotes investment in productive agricultural practices and better access to formal credit. So, land tenure databases should include a wide range of factors and be linked to other databases on agricultural production, productive assets, and capital mobilization. Such linkages provide policymakers with important insights into areas that require more attention. A comprehensive and reliable land tenure database system is not feasible without effective arrangements for managing state land, including economic and social land concessions. Three initial steps are required: identifying and mapping state land, registration and classification of state land, and creating and maintaining the state land maps and database. Existing occupancy and land use must be identified, and a type of land use suitability mapping must be conducted, including databases associated with soil type classifications and water resources availability.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Land reforms in Cambodia have had both positive and negative effects.

Positive effects

Increased land tenure security: Land reforms have aimed at providing formal land titles to farmers and indigenous communities, thus ensuring their rights and protecting them from forced evictions and land disputes.

Reduction in poverty: By redistributing land to landless farmers and marginalized communities, land reforms have helped alleviate poverty and promote rural development.

Agricultural productivity improvement: Land reforms have encouraged investment in agricultural infrastructure and technology, leading to increased productivity and improved rural livelihoods.

Social stability: By addressing historical injustices and reducing land conflicts, land reforms have contributed to enhanced social stability and reduced inequality.

Negative effects

Displacement of vulnerable groups: Land reforms have not always been implemented smoothly, resulting in the displacement of vulnerable groups, such as indigenous communities, who may face difficulties adjusting to new areas or lose access to their traditional resources.

Inequitable distribution of land: Despite efforts to redistribute land, there have been cases of influential individuals or corporations benefiting more, leading to unequal distribution of land resources.

Lack of enforcement: Weak enforcement and corruption in implementing land reforms have undermined their intended outcomes, allowing powerful actors to circumvent land laws and exploit resources unlawfully.

Environmental degradation: Large-scale land conversions for commercial purposes, driven by land reforms, have sometimes resulted in environmental degradation, deforestation, and biodiversity loss.

Policy recommendations

The following policy recommendations aim to maximize the positive socio-economic impacts of land reform while minimizing the negative consequences. It is essential to consider Cambodia's specific context and needs in implementing these recommendations while also acknowledging the importance of stakeholder collaboration and participatory decision-making processes.

Secure Land Tenure Rights: Establish clear and enforceable land tenure rights for all citizens, including marginalized groups such as indigenous communities and small-scale farmers. This will foster confidence in the system and reduce conflicts and displacement.

Strengthen Land Registration and Administration: Invest in digitized land registration systems, ensuring transparency, efficiency, and accuracy of land records. This will reduce land disputes and corruption and facilitate investments and economic growth.

Promote Equitable Land Redistribution: Implement a fair land redistribution program that prioritizes the needs of landless or land-poor farmers, ensuring they have access to productive land. Consider family-based or cooperative land management approaches to enhance productivity and social cohesion.

Enhance Land Use Planning: Develop comprehensive land use planning frameworks considering ecological sustainability, agricultural productivity, and infrastructure development. Encourage multi-stakeholder participation to ensure fair representation and inclusivity.

Introduce Zoning Regulations: Establish clear zoning regulations to optimize land use in both urban and rural areas. Zoning can prevent uncontrolled land speculation, protect agricultural land, and designate specific areas for industrial, residential, and environmental conservation purposes. This would help balance development with environmental sustainability and ensure that land is utilized effectively while minimizing conflicts.

Strengthen Agricultural Support Systems: Provide necessary support to small-scale farmers through improved access to credit, technical knowledge, irrigation facilities, and market linkages. This will enhance productivity, income generation, and food security.

Protect Environmental Sustainability: Enforce strict regulations on land use practices to prevent deforestation, soil degradation, and unsustainable exploitation of natural

resources. Encourage the adoption of climate-smart agriculture techniques to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Ensure Social Safeguards: Implement comprehensive social safeguards to protect vulnerable populations affected by land reform. This includes providing compensation, alternative livelihood options, and access to basic services like healthcare and education.

Strengthen Legal and Judicial Institutions: Invest in capacity building and resources for legal and judicial institutions to ensure effective and timely resolution of land disputes. This will promote a sense of justice and confidence in the land reform process.

Foster Transparent Governance: Promote accountability, transparency, and citizen engagement in the land reform process. Establish mechanisms for public consultation, grievance redressal, and monitoring to ensure the fair implementation of policies.

Monitor and Evaluate Impact: Continuously monitor and evaluate the socio-economic and environmental impacts of land reform policies. Regular assessment will help identify any unintended consequences and enable policymakers to make necessary adjustments.

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From Conflict to Cohesion: Cambodia's Journey Towards Peace & Prosperity

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Executive Summary

Until 1998, Cambodia experienced ongoing war and internal conflicts. Historically, Cambodia went through a series of internal conflicts, which resulted in the loss of lives, displaced people, and a low-level of socioeconomic development. Cambodia was under French colonialism from 1863 to 1953. The most dramatic period was during 1975 – 1979 when the Khmer Rouge took over the country. The country declined to almost “zero”. More than two million people died from killing, overwork and starvation. After the Khmer Rouge the country experienced a series of regime changes. However, after obtaining full peace in 1998, the country has developed very quickly. Cambodia sustained two-decades of high economic growth, averaging over 7 percent per year before COVID-19 struck in 2020. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge, internal border or zone conflicts and regional disparities were challenges to its overall development. Finally in 1998, the people of Cambodia obtained full peace. Uniting and integrating diverse provinces and regions within the country was crucial for promoting national cohesion, ensuring equitable distribution of resources, and fostering sustainable development.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the strategies, stakeholders, and potential advantages associated with eliminating internal factional zones in Cambodia. Specifically, the study aims to (1) understand the historical significance and contemporary implications of internal zones (2) identify key actors, institutions, and organizations that can play a role in the process of border-zone elimination; (3) analyze potential social, economic, and political benefits resulting from ending internal zones; and (4) provide recommendations on necessary policy reforms, institutional frameworks, and implementation strategies for a zoneless Cambodia.

Note: This policy research paper is the collaboration between the Ministry of land Management Urban Planning and Construction & National University of Management

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A multi-disciplinary approach was adopted, utilizing a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, including (1) literature review through the gathering of existing knowledge on internal zones, regional disparities, and their implications for Cambodia's development; (2) key informant interviews to be conducted with relevant stakeholders, including policymakers, government officials, community leaders, and representatives from civil society organizations; (3) case studies that analyze successful precedents from countries that have effectively eliminated internal borders-zones to extract valuable lessons for Cambodia; (4) data analysis, utilizing available statistical data to assess the socio-economic impact of internal border zones on different regions within Cambodia; and (5) stakeholder workshops, participatory workshops involving various stakeholders to validate findings, identify potential challenges, and develop a comprehensive action plan.

Based on literature reviews and consultative workshops, this study found that ending internal conflicts has impacted positively on Cambodia's development trajectory. First, economic growth and poverty reduction have been impressive. Cambodia achieved more than 7 percent-point growth over the last 2 decades. Perhaps an immediate gain for Cambodia's ending conflict in 1998 was its membership acceptance to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1999, although after the suspension in the previous year. The accession to ASEAN made Cambodia integrated into a single market of a combined 10 countries in the Southeast Asia region. Foreign direct investment grew substantially, especially after Cambodia's accession to the World Trade organization (WTO) in 2004. It is expected that in 2023, GDP per capita will be 1,924 Dollars (MEF, 2023). Inflation rate was kept between 2 and 3 percent until 2021. The economic performance in the past has been relatively inclusive and has lifted millions of Cambodians out of poverty. Cambodia's national poverty rate fell by almost half between 2009 and 2019. Cambodia's poverty rate dropped from 33.8 percent to 17.8 percent over the ten-year period to 2019/2020, with almost 2 million Cambodians escaping poverty. Second, human development has substantially improved. Growing evidence highlights the investments in people are needed to drive economic progress and sustainable development. In Cambodia, the completion rates in primary education increased from 82.7% in 2018 to 91.72% in 2022. Completion rates in lower secondary education grew from 46.5% in 2018 to 56.50% in 2022. In addition, Cambodia has achieved the Gender Parity Index (GPI) level in education. The GPI of the Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) in lower and upper secondary education increased from 1.09 in 2018 to 1.17 in 2022. The adult literacy rate increased from 67.34% in 1998 to 87.8% in 2022. The country made commendable improvements between 1990 and 2021 as life expectancy increased by more than 14 years to surpass the age of 70; and its mean years of schooling grew by 2.4 years to 5.1 years. With these improvements in income, health and education, the country's HDI increased by 56.9%, reaching the medium human development category and putting Cambodia at 146 among 191 countries.

Last, of the key progress made in Cambodia's development trajectory is that Cambodia became a lower-middle income country and is on the road to graduating from the Least Developed Country status, expected in 2027. Sustained and rapid development prior to the COVID-19 pandemic advanced Cambodia to a lower-middle-income country status in 2018 and to meet for the first time the criteria to graduate from the LDC category in 2021. It is expected that Cambodia will meet the three criteria for graduating from the LDC in the upcoming 2024 triennial review as the country seems to be following the right trajectory, having achieved an average GDP growth of 7.7% annually for the past two decades. Among many things that Cambodia has achieved in the past two decades, the openness of its economy to international trade and investment stands out – particularly following its afore mentioned accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in October 2004. When Cambodia acceded to the WTO, its merchandise exports were \$3.39 billion and these have increased to \$22.47 billion as of 2022. Incoming FDI increased from \$130 million in 2004 to \$3.58 billion in 2022. The country is projected to grow further by 2050 with critical expected outcomes and achievements by implementing the the Pentagonal Strategy – Phase I.

In conclusion, Cambodia has experienced significant socio-economic growth over the years, but internal borders or factional zones and regional disparities were challenges to its overall development. Uniting and integrating diverse provinces and regions within the country is crucial for promoting national cohesion, ensuring equitable distribution of resources, and fostering sustainable development. The study explores the potential pathways and actors involved in ending internal border-zones in Cambodia, examining the actors, strategies, and potential socio-economic benefits of this transformative process. This study employs a multi-disciplinary approach including literature reviews, key informant interviews, case studies, secondary data analysis and consultative workshops. Wars and conflicts were aggravated by factors such as the legacy of French Colonialism, socio-economic inequality, the growing nationalism of local actors in Indochina and the ideological interest of the region. Efforts have been made to end wars and internal conflicts, and not until 1998, the country managed to achieve full peace. As a result, peace allows for rapid economic growth, poverty reduction, and human development. This study suggests that in order to attain the development and growth, ending conflicts and national unity are the pre-requisites.

1. Background

1.1 Introduction

Until 1998, Cambodia experienced ongoing war and internal conflicts. Before World War II, Cambodia was a heavily taxed, relatively quiet corner of the French empire. Cambodia was under French colonialism from 1863 to 1953. The most dramatic period was during 1975 – 1979 when Khmer Rouge took over the country. The country declined to almost zero. More than two million of people died from killing, overworked and starvation. After the Khmer Rouge period, the country experienced a series of regime changes. However, after obtaining full peace in 1998, the country has developed very quickly. Cambodia sustained two-decades of high economic growth, averaging over 7 percent per year before COVID-19 struck in 2020. The garment exports and tourism were the most important sub-sectors underpinning the growth. The poverty rate in Cambodia has continued to decline from 53% in 2004 to 17.8% in 2019. During the COVID-19 crisis, the country's GDP registered a negative growth, but it started to gradually recover in 2021 and 2022. Having reached lower middle-income status in 2015, it sets a sign on attaining upper middle-income status by 2030. As a result, Cambodia became a lower-middle income country in 2018 and is now on the verge of graduating from the Least Developed Country (LDC) in 2029.

During the COVID-19 crisis, the country's GDP registered a negative growth, but it started to gradually recover in 2021 and 2022. Post-pandemic, Cambodia's economic recovery has gained momentum. Traditional growth drivers, specially manufacturing and agricultural commodities exports, have fully recovered. However, while travel and tourism have improved, the sector remains well below pre-COVID-19 levels. Besides COVID-19 pandemic, Cambodia still has to tackle a myriad of other pressing challenges such as wars in Ukraine, low productivity due to low skills and quality of education and healthcare, low level of technology, and Climate Change. However, due to a clear vision, Cambodia has maintained a stable momentum after COVID-19 due to right and timely responses and intervention from the government on the areas of social protection and economic recovery.

Historically, Cambodia went through a series of internal conflicts, which resulted in loss of lives, displaced people, low-level of socioeconomic development. In the period of 1975-79, the country fell declined to near zero. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge, internal border zone conflicts and regional disparities were challenges to its overall development. Until 1998, the people of Cambodia obtained full peace. Uniting and integrating diverse provinces and regions within the country is crucial for promoting national cohesion, ensuring equitable distribution of resources, and fostering sustainable development. This paper explores the potential pathways and actors involved in ending internal borders in Cambodia, examining the actors, strategies, and potential socio-economic benefits of this transformative process.

This article is divided into 8 sections. Section 1 provides a background of the study. Section 2 reviews Cambodia's post-colonial history of conflicts. Section 3 highlights the causes and factors aggravating the internal conflicts. Section 4 is about internal intervention and the peace effort. Section 5 highlights the fall of the last Khmer Rouge stronghold. Section 6 describes the consequences of the internal conflicts. Section 7 analyses the benefits of ending the internal conflicts and Section 8 concludes.

1.2 Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the strategies, stakeholders, and potential advantages associated with eliminating internal borders in Cambodia. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Understand the historical significance and contemporary implications of internal border-zones.
- Identify key actors, institutions, and organizations that can play a role in the process of border-zone elimination.
- Analyze potential social, economic, and political benefits resulting from ending internal border-zones.
- Provide recommendations on necessary policy reforms, institutional frameworks, and implementation strategies for a borderless zone Cambodia.

1.3 Methodology

To achieve the aforementioned objectives, a multi-disciplinary approach was adopted, utilizing a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods such as:

- Literature review: Gather existing knowledge on internal border-zones, regional disparities, and their implications for Cambodia's development.
- Key informant interviews: Conduct interviews with relevant stakeholders, including policymakers, government officials, community leaders, and representatives from civil society organizations.
- Case studies: Analyze successful precedents from countries that have effectively eliminated internal border-zones to extract valuable lessons for Cambodia.
- Data analysis: Utilize available statistical data to assess the socio-economic impact of internal border-zones on different regions within Cambodia.
- Stakeholder workshops: Facilitate participatory workshops involving various stakeholders to validate findings, identify potential challenges, and develop a comprehensive action plan.

1.4 Expected Findings and Outputs

- A contextualized analysis of the historical and present-day significance of internal border-zones in Cambodia.

- An overview of key stakeholders involved and their respective roles in the process of border-zone elimination.
- A comprehensive understanding of potential social, economic, and political benefits derived from a borderless-zone Cambodia.
- Policy recommendations and action plan for the Cambodian government to initiate the process and overcome associated challenges.
- Academic research paper and policy brief summarizing the study's findings for wider dissemination.

1.5 Practical Implications

The results of this study will contribute towards evidence-based policy formulation, fostering political will and public support for sustaining peace for Cambodia. The recommendations and frameworks developed will empower governmental and non-governmental actors of the future generation and of other countries to actively work towards the elimination of internal border-zones, leading to enhanced national unity, balanced regional development, improved resource allocation, and sustainable economic growth.

2. Cambodia's Post-colonial History of Internal Conflicts – A Review

Pre-independence

It is important to note that Cambodia was under French Colonialism for 90 years. In the French colonial era, Cambodia was a protectorate, not a colony. Sovereignty was not officially destroyed, but as the 1877 and 1884 conventions showed, opposition to French rule was not broken (Slocomb, 2010). Under the terms of the Treaty of Guardianship, King Norodom handed over control of foreign relations to France for protection in return. During the colonial period, the French protectorate had a great influence on the structure and institutions that became modern Cambodia.

According to Slocomb (2010), Cambodia's economy at the turn of the twentieth century was characterised overwhelmingly by subsistence agriculture. Trade and usury, as commercial activities, were usually conducted by Chinese Cambodians. Private wealth most certainly existed; high officials, the Okhnya, were made rich by taxing the surplus product of the farmers and others in their domains or apanages, but wealth served the twinned purposes of prestige and power, not the creation of capital. In terms of meeting French needs, Cambodia's most valuable natural resource was what the Administration regarded as vacant land. The first world rubber boom occurred in 1910 and this necessitated the introduction of a labour law which applied to the whole colony and remained in force until the end of World War I.

After Japan's defeat in World War II, the reimposition by force of French colonial control of Indochina provoked armed nationalist resistance by both Viet Minh and Khmer Issarak

(“independence”) forces. Protracted anti-colonial conflict in both Vietnam and Cambodia fostered the emergence by 1951 of a Vietnamese-sponsored Cambodian communist movement, the Khmer People’s Revolutionary Party (KPRP), which won increasing though not unchallenged pre-eminence among Issarak nationalists contesting French control of their country. One faction of the independence movement initially called itself “Democratic Kampuchea” — the title later used by the Pol Pot regime as the official name of its Khmer Rouge state. Members of another anti-communist splinter group carried out racist massacres of ethnic Vietnamese in 1949, and of Chams in 1952. Saloth Sar, latter known as Pol Pot, a student in Paris calling himself the “Original Khmer,” returned home in 1953 and briefly served in the communist led Issarak ranks.

1954 – 1968

The first Indochina War was attributable to Cambodia’s declaration of independence in 1953 and the withdrawal of French troops from Cambodia and Indochina in 1954. The glorious period after independence from France in 1953, the Sangkum Reastr Niyum lasted from 1955 to 1970, when Prince Norodom Sihanouk formed his own party after surrendering the throne to his father and winning the election. That year, King Sihanouk became Prime Minister and built his vision of a new nation. Sereypagna (2017) notes that at that time, Cambodia enjoyed an unprecedented era of economic and social development, associated with a renaissance of the arts and architecture. The Sangkum employed a variety of strategies to drive growth.

Ongoing close cooperation with longstanding foreign investors and guarantees that their investments were safe from nationalisation served to attract further investment which enjoyed very liberal, even generous terms. Foreign aid was spent on infrastructure works that were essential to industrialisation and to attracting new investment: for instance, the seaport at Sihanoukville and the road and rail links between the port and the capital, the hydroelectric plant, bridges linking the capital with key provinces, and so on (Slocomb, 2010). There was public investment in state-owned enterprises and experimentation with mixed-economy enterprises and rural cooperatives.

As a developing country Cambodia was considered by many to be a model of successful decolonisation (Slocomb, 2010). Modernisation was about adding value through domestic manufacturing and processing of local resources and primary products and then profiting from their export or sale. Protective tariffs were the norm globally to ensure that domestic industry did not suffer from foreign competition.

1968 – 1975

However, coming near to 1970, the coercive power of the state was far too weak, and the private sector far too powerful vis-à-vis the public and mixed-economy sectors for this situation to change. Institutional development lagged far behind economic development.

Foreign aid receipts should have provided the government space to allow sources of that surplus to develop. There was little agricultural diversification during the Sangkum and the national economy remained dependent on the same crops as during the French Protectorate, namely rice and rubber.

Natural rubber was already coming under intense competition from synthetic rubber, but the state continued to establish new plantations, despite increasingly organised resistance from among indigenous groups like those around the Labansiek plantation in Ratanakiri where approximately thirty thousands of Khmer Islam ethnic minorities had settled since the early independence (Slocumb, 2010). Fundamentally, the nature and structure of the Cambodian economy in 1969 was little different from what it had been at independence.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the war in Vietnam was fought on Cambodia soil, destabilizing the whole country. In the early 1960s, the U.S. conducted airstrikes targeting Viet Cong in Cambodia's eastern parts – Parrot's Beak and Fishhook. In 1967, a revolt took place in Samlout alleging the expropriation of land for sugar plantation but was later violently suppressed by government military forces. From this point, Cambodia had fallen into a civil war (Kiernan, 2007; Chandler, 2008). In 1968, the Khmer Rouge initiated guerrilla insurgency in 17 provinces. The civil war that broke out after the bloodless coup that ousted Prince Norodom Sihanouk in March 1970 was fought between the pro-US Lon Nol republican regime and the pro-China Khmer Rouge revolutionary or communist movement. The Khmer Rouge won the war but turned the country into "killing fields" (Peou, 2020).

Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, Cambodia was deeply factionalised, as evidenced by the fact that the country was at war and under repressive regimes, especially one led by the Khmer Rouge leadership (1975–1978). With support from communist countries such as China and North Vietnam, the GRUNK fought the Khmer Republic and American. The U.S. bombardment and airstrike on Viet Cong supply routes in Laos and Cambodia in 1969. While suffering massive US bombing campaigns and the growth of the Khmer Rouge insurgency, a coup led by the pro-US military ended the monarchy's rule and established the Khmer Republic in 1970 (Chang, 2022). In March 1970, King Norodom Sihanouk was overthrown in a coup d'état and on 9 October 1970, the Khmer Republic (1970–1975) was formally declared. Headed by General Lon Nol and Prince Sisowath Sirikmatak, it abolished Cambodia's centuries-old monarchy and installed a US-style presidency. There are reasons to look for liberal elements in Cambodian republicanism. There are strong conceptual links through the concept of liberalism (Norén-Nilsson, 2022). Khmer Rouge took advantage of the US bombing in Cambodia and the subsequent coup as a recruitment tool and emerged as a key player amongst the Royal Government of the National Union of Kampuchea (GRUNK) coalition against the Lon Nol's government.

1975 – 1979

The most tragic period was from April 1975 to January 1979, when the country fell into communist Khmer Rouge hands which established Democratic Kampuchea. The "new Cambodia" lasted exactly three years, eight months, and twenty days, during which time the people of Cambodia were subjected to a cataclysmic social experiment. During the period, the Khmer Rouge carried out a program of mass violence that is, in many respects, unparalleled in modern history. Its ruthlessness was characterized by extreme policies (so called the Great Leap Policy) and mass killing of people including those belonging to ethnic groups such as Chinese, Vietnamese, Cham Muslim, and Thai.

The regime dismantled property rights and religions, shut down schools, and abandoned national currency. Mass evacuation of about 2 million people from Phnom Penh to the countryside, particularly to Battambang and Pursat provinces where evacuees were forced to produce crops three times of the pre-regime yield. In just under four years, approximately two million people died from starvation, disease, exhaustion, inadequate medical care, torture, murder, and execution. The total number of deaths translates into one-quarter to one-third of the country's pre-1975 population (Heuveline, 1998; Kiernan, 2003).

1979 – 1991

In 1979, Cambodia emerged from four years of brutal Khmer Rouge rule as a shattered country (Slocumb, 2004). It was the second most dramatic period when Cambodia started to build back from zero. Economic production had declined dramatically, the collectivization of agriculture having been a total disaster. There was no private sector and very few educated persons to take over the reins of state. Government organizations were virtually non-existent and infrastructure ruined. The new government, with Vietnamese support, made steady but slow progress in rehabilitating economy and society while international wrangling over Cambodia's future meant that foreign aid was just a trickle despite the country's enormous needs. During the 1980s, the government of People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) struggled to rebuild, with limited resources, a country in ruins of ten years of civil war, foreign invasions, bombardments, and Democratic Kampuchea (DK) experiments in ultra-collectivization (Frings, 1994). With Vietnamese guidance, economic reconstruction was done in a social framework. While trying to improve socio-economic conditions with limited resources, the country the government during that time was also engaging intensively with fighting against Khmer Rouge.

The spring of 1989 marked the end of state socialism in Cambodia when a Peace Agreement was reached under the initiative of the French and Indonesian governments. The breakthrough came in 1991 with the Paris Peace Agreements followed by the arrival of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). Democratic

elections were held, and vast amounts of foreign aid began to flow into the country. The economy was opened up and the growth of the private sector encouraged. Economic development was important but initially took second place to the achievement of political objectives.

After the turmoil of 1997, marked by the bloody clashes in July of that year, and the political standoff that followed the elections of July 1998, Cambodia in 1999 experienced a year of remarkable stability. The extent to which this political stability was matched by an improvement in the lot of the general population continues to be a matter for debate, but there is no argument against the proposition that, at the level of national politics, Prime Minister Hun Sen's dominance has been clearly established (Osborne, 2000).

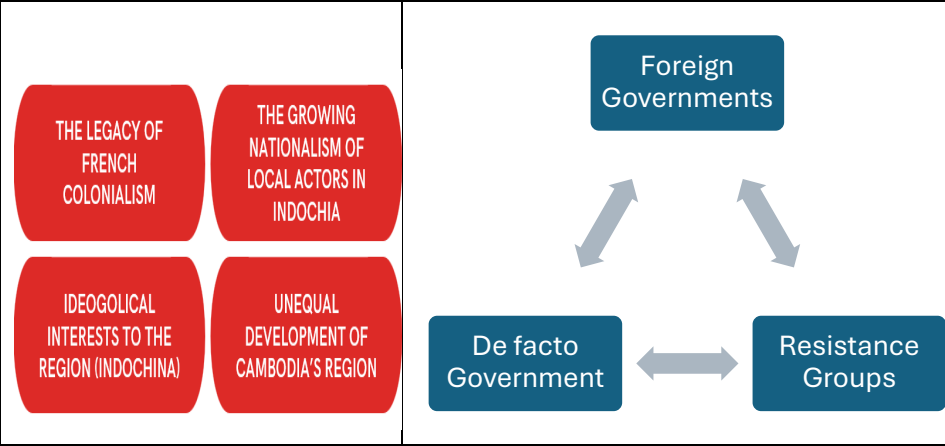
3. Causes and Factors Aggravating Internal Conflict

Major root causes of internal conflicts include political, economic, and social inequalities; extreme poverty; economic stagnation; poor government services; high unemployment; environmental degradation; and individual (economic) incentives to fight (Stewart, Holdstock, & Jarquin, 2002). Conflicts in Cambodia were caused by intertwining factors such as legacy of the colonialism, political interests of the region, growing nationalism of countries in the region, and unequal economic development. Actors involved in the conflicts included de facto governments, resistance groups and foreign governments.

The legacy of French colonialism had mixed influence on social and political thinking in Cambodia. While the French introduced modern infrastructure and educational system, it failed to create liberal ruling system for Cambodia and indirectly the French presence helped foster the emergence of communist movement in the country (udom Deth, 2009). Cambodian people were suffered during the colonialism as they were heavily taxed. The French colonialism left Cambodia in extreme poverty and high inequality. There were also elite groups, who had been provided with novel opportunities (Slocomb, 2010). There is no established national dialogue on the historical role of French colonialism (1867–1946) in producing vast disparities in wealth that gave rise to social discontent and thereby radicalized segments of the population (Kiernan, 2002).

Coupled with high inequality during after the independence and the rising popularity of the communist ideology, Cambodia enjoyed peace for only short period of time. The movement's members, who were a new elite intellectual class, came some of whom studied in France in the late 1940s and early 1950s brought in Communism. Those people included Saloth Sar (latter Known as Pol Pot), Son Sen, Ieng Sary, and Ieng Thirith, and would later become leaders of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, more commonly known as the "Khmer Rouge," meaning red/communist Khmer. In addition to embracing ideas of nationalism, these future leaders also studied the communist teachings of Lenin and Marx, which shaped their ideas and plans for their nation's future.

Figure 1: Causes and Actors Involving in Internal Conflicts



Source: Authors' compilation based on various sources

The political instability arises especially from the coup in 1970. Urban-rural disparities had been serious since the French colonial period (Slocomb, 2010). The richest five percent of the population accounted for more than 30 percent of the national income. Another 20 percent of the population, who were in the non-agriculture sector, owned 60% of the national income. The effort of Lon Nol and Sarimatak taking power in 1970 led the country to adopt a corrupt republic government that did not, at that time, receive much popularity, especially amongst the rural population. However, Khmer Rouge propaganda was effective to recruit people to rebel against the republic government and the US's bombardment.

Collier and Hoeffler (2004) posited that availability of finance made civil conflict feasible in the long run. Civil war in Cambodia was undeniably financed by foreign governments. For instance, Lon Nol's government was supported by the US to fight against the Chinese-backed Khmer Rouge forces. Similarly, the Chinese-back Khmer Rouge regime during 1975-1979 was overthrown by the Vietnamese-support resistance group since 1978.

The period of 1954 to 1975 was characterized by the political interest of the Indochina region of the superpowers – namely the United State of America, USSR, and China. Cambodia suffered severely and eventually fell into civil war. Once the United States escalated the Vietnam War in 1964-65, Cambodia had little hope of remaining an oasis of peace. Its frontiers became increasingly porous and vulnerable. Cambodia was drawn further into the war by waves of ethnic Khmer refugees fleeing Saigon's persecution, Vietnamese communists seeking neutral sanctuary, anticommunist troops in "hot pursuit," and U.S. Special Forces incursions and jetfighter raids. Then, in 1969, President Nixon ordered extensive B-52 bombing raids of border areas of Cambodia.

All in all, in the thirty years after World War II, Cambodia witnessed the reassertion of colonial power, the spread of nationalism, the birth and growth of a communist party, the achievement of independence, the stifling of reform during a decade of peace, the rise of an armed domestic insurgency, the encroachment of an international war, massive bombardment and civilian casualties, pogroms and ethnic “cleansing” of religious minorities (Kiernan, 2002).

4. International Intervention and Efforts for Peace

Efforts for peace started in 1988, when the first face-to-face talks among the four Cambodian parties took place in Jakarta. In April 1989, Viet Nam announced the withdrawal of its troops from Cambodia. In July-August 1989, the parties and 17 countries attended the Paris Conference on Cambodia also attended by the Secretary-General. In September, Viet Nam announced that the troop withdrawal had been completed. At the same time, the United Nations ran a programme of humanitarian assistance to the Cambodian people, in Cupertino??? since 1980, funded by voluntary contributions from Member States, and consisting of three major components – the operations within Cambodia, at the border and within Thailand. Assistance was provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and by the United Nations Border Relief Operations (UNBRO), set up in 1982. Other bodies, such as the United Nations Children's Fund, the World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, also contributed.

In January 1990, the five permanent members of the Security Council, including China, France, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States, started a series of high-level meetings on Cambodia. They called for a major United Nations role in bringing peace to Cambodia, including peacekeeping forces, supervision of free elections and an administrative structure in the period leading up to the elections. In August 1990, the five permanent members announced an agreement on the main elements of a political settlement to end the conflict in Cambodia. The plan called for the control and/or supervision by the United Nations of the country's administrative structures, followed by United Nations-supervised elections. The plan was accepted by all Cambodian parties and by Viet Nam, and was endorsed in September by the Security Council

In November 1990, the permanent members agreed on a draft text on Cambodia which covered a proposed mandate for a United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC); withdrawal, ceasefire and related measures; elections; repatriation of refugees; and principles for a new constitution. In 1991, the Cambodian parties decided to implement an unlimited ceasefire and to stop receiving military assistance. They signed in Paris the Agreements on the Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict – a peace treaty to end the instability and prepare the country for elections.²⁹

²⁹ <https://cambodia.un.org/en/about/about-the-un>

The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (March 1992-Sept 1993) was established to ensure implementation of the Agreements. UNTAC's mandate ended in September 1993 with the promulgation of the Constitution for the Kingdom of Cambodia and the inauguration of the new, democratically elected, Royal Government of Cambodia.

On 23 October 1991, the parties signed in Paris the Agreements on the Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict, a peace treaty to end the conflict and prepare the country for elections. The Agreements assigned to the United Nations an unprecedented role. The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (March 1992-Sept 1993) was established to ensure implementation of the Agreements. UNTAC's mandate ended in September 1993 with the promulgation of the Constitution for the Kingdom of Cambodia and the inauguration of the new, democratically elected, Royal Government of Cambodia. UNTAC would supervise the ceasefire, the end of foreign military assistance and the withdrawal of foreign forces; regroup, canton and disarm all armed forces of the Cambodian parties, and ensure a 70 per cent level of demobilization; control and supervise the activities of the administrative structures, including the police; ensure and respect of human rights; and organize and conduct free and fair elections. At its peak, UNTAC numbered over 21,000 military and civilian personnel from more than 100 countries.

UNTAC was to comprise between 15,000 and 20,000 United Nations personnel, including human rights, civil administrative and military components, as well as a police component of some 3,600 police monitors. The deployment of UNTAC began officially on 15 March 1992, with the arrival in the capital city of Phnom Penh of the Head of UNTAC, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Cambodia. The first contingent of UNTAC's military component had also arrived, and by early May, some 4,000 United Nations personnel, including some 3,600 troops, were in place. UNTAC assumed control of key sectors of the country's administrative structures, such as foreign affairs, defence, security, finance and communications -- in order to build a stable environment conducive to national elections. At the same time, UNHCR oversaw the successful repatriation and resettlement of some 360,000 refugees and displaced persons.

A major step towards normalization occurred with the elections of May 1993. Twenty parties took part in the elections. UNTAC oversaw the electoral campaign and registration of voters, as well as the elections. Over 4.2 million people -- nearly 90 per cent of the registered voters -- cast their ballots to elect a Constituent Assembly. The head of UNTAC declared the elections free and fair. In September, the Constitution was proclaimed and a new government, led by two prime ministers, was inaugurated.

After the withdrawal of UNTAC, several United Nations agencies have remained in the country to support reconstruction and development. In 1993, in conformity with the Paris Agreements, the Secretary-General appointed a Special Representative for Human Rights to assist the Government in promoting and protecting human rights. Working closely with

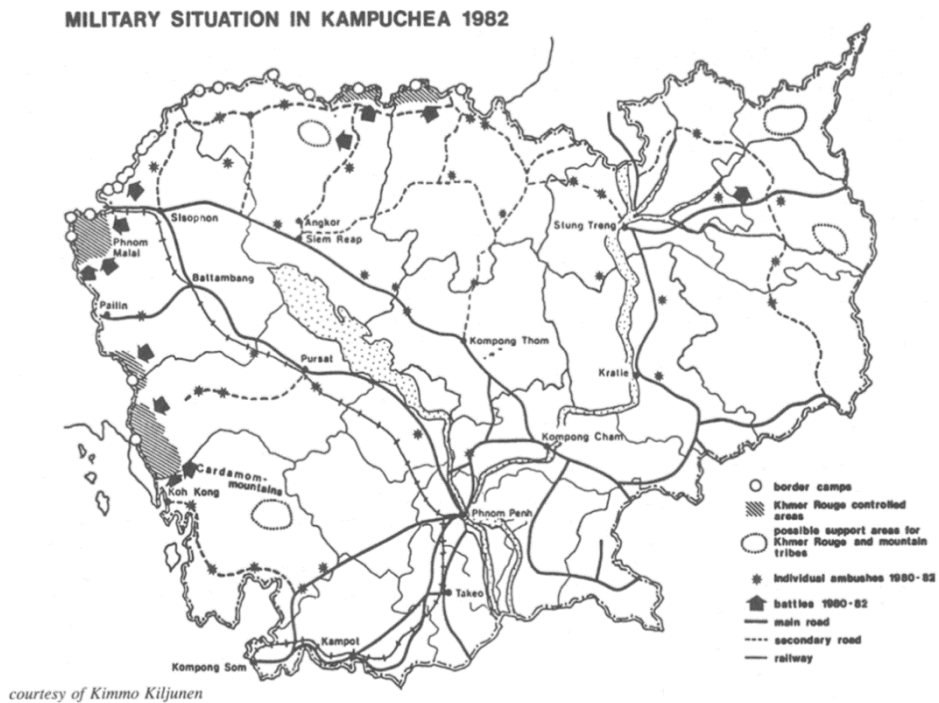
the Special Representative, a Cambodia Office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights sought to strengthen civil society and build institutions and legal structures for human rights and democracy. In 1994, the Secretary-General appointed a Representative for Cambodia to serve as a liaison with the Government, monitor the political situation and report on developments relating to peace and security.

5. Fall of the last Khmer Rouge Stronghold

During the Khmer Rouge regime, Cambodia was divided into seven zones. Each zone was controlled by different regional leaderships. The Khmer Rouge boycotted the UN sponsored election in 1993 and was outlawed in 1994 (Kiernan, 2002). Khmer Rouge attempted to hampered the election using two methods, attacking UN personnel and intimidating Khmer citizens from voting (Vu, 1994). The Khmer Rouge was deeply fragmented by 1996. Ieng Sary defected to the government and was allowed to remain with his followers in his small territory in Pailin. Pol Pot assassinated Son Sen in 1997 and was later captured by Ta Mok and put under house-imprisonment until his death.

Anlong Veng area was the last Khmer Rouge stronghold before its occupants surrendered to government forces in 1998. The government's position regarding the Khmer Rouge shifted significantly in the late 1990s. Following the UN-brokered 1991 Paris Peace Agreement, which ended the Vietnamese military occupation and initiated a ceasefire in Cambodia, a discourse of national reconciliation emerged to encourage the KR to abandon opposition to the government and renounce its involvement with Pol Pot's forces. The emerging discourse of integration and reconciliation encouraged Cambodians to repress many aspects of the KR genocidal past, as Prime Minister Hun Sen famously urged, 'Dig a hole and bury the past in it,' a statement which called for national reconciliation and forgiveness for low-level KR cadres by eliminating or suppressing memories of the genocide (Sirik, 2020). During this reconstruction process, reconciliation, integration, and development were major components of the price for peace. Policies, strategies and practices were implemented in order to defeat the remaining KR factions.

Figure 2: Military situation in Kampuchea 1982



Source: Kimmo Kiljunen, 1985

The 1998 fall of the last KR stronghold of Anlong Veng signaled the defeat of the movement by the Phnom Penh government. Prime Minister Hun Sen of the CPP precipitated the collapse of the KR via his 'win-win policy' to achieve national reconciliation through the integration of KR cadres and their families into society-at-large. Through the implementation of this strategy, the government officially granted umbrella amnesty to KR members in order to achieve national reconciliation. Reconciliation and forgiveness are the price for peace, even if reconciliation means digging a hole in which to bury the past (Sirik, 2020).

6. Consequences of Civil Wars

6.1 Process of national reconciliation and establishing democratic system

After the 1993 General Election, Cambodia has pursued a market-based economy. Cambodia has become a small open economy, and a member of the WTO in October 2004 (Hill & Menon, 2014). Since 1979, Cambodia's political and economic systems have transformed over time from civil war to peace, from a planned economy to a free market approach, and from authoritarianism to a developing democracy (Hughes, 2020).

In Cambodia, reconciliation initiatives to date have focused primarily on healing scars from the Khmer Rouge period. That period was the most terrifying in the country's history, but it was not the only period of human rights abuses. Like the process of deciding what truth bears telling, choosing the reference point for reconciliation entails powerful normative and political considerations (Ciorciari & Ramji-Nogales, 2012).

During the 1980s various efforts on reconciliation were made. However, those efforts were not successful. The result, finalized on October 23, 1991, was the Paris Peace Accords, which established an eighteen-month UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). The most ambitious peacebuilding initiative in UN history, it provided for military peacekeepers, civil administration, and UN-sponsored elections in 1993. However, it did not focus on truth, reconciliation and justice, largely because its architects feared such provisions would lead Khmer Rouge insurgents to spoil the peace.

During the 1990s, Prime Minister Hun Sen used amnesty as part of an effort to pursue peace, an approach that served to increase his political power but compromised the goal of justice and did nothing to advance truth. Prime Minister Hun Sen pursued a policy of "national reconciliation" focused on courting Khmer Rouge defectors. He brokered a key 1996 deal with Khmer Rouge leader Ieng Sary, who defected with roughly 3,000 of his fighters – a substantial fraction of the total insurgent ranks – in exchange for a royal amnesty and pardon granted by King Sihanouk in September of the same year. Those defections almost brought the Khmer Rouge armed resistance to a halt.

After many changes of different types of governance under different regimes, the 1993 Constitution marked the establishment of a liberal democratic state and a market economy as the foundations of Cambodia's social, political and economic structure. The Constitution guarantees a broad range of civil liberties and fundamental rights. Citizens are to be equal before the law and are entitled to enjoy the same rights and duties regardless of sex, religion, or race. They have the right to participate in the political, economic, social, and cultural life of the country and to be paid according to the amount and quality of work they perform. Men and women are entitled to equal pay for equal work.

The Constitution also guarantees the inviolability of people and of their homes; privacy of correspondence; freedom from illegal search and arrest; the right to claim reparation for damages caused by illegal actions of the state, social organizations, and their personnel; and freedom of speech, of the press, and of assembly. The exercise of fundamental rights, however, is subject to certain restrictions. For example, an act may not injure the honour of other persons, nor should it adversely affect the mores and customs of society, or public order, or national security. The Constitution also addresses principles governing culture, education, social welfare, and public health. Development of language, literature, the arts, and science and technology are stressed, along with the

need for cultural preservation, tourist promotion, and cultural cooperation with foreign countries. Provisions for state organs are in the constitutional chapters dealing with the National Assembly, the Council of State, the Council of Ministers, the local people's revolutionary committees, and the judiciary.

The "supreme organ of state power" is the National Assembly, whose deputies are directly elected for five-year terms. The assembly had been empowered to adopt or to amend the Constitution and the laws and to oversee their implementation; to determine domestic and foreign policies; to adopt economic and cultural programs and the state budget; and to elect or to remove its own officers and members of the Council of State and of the Council of Ministers. The assembly also was authorized to levy, revise, or abolish taxes; to decide on amnesties; and to ratify or to abrogate international treaties. As in other socialist states, the Assembly's real function is to endorse the legislative and administrative measures initiated by the Council of State and by the Council of Ministers.

6.2 The Establishment of ECCC

The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) were established to bring to trial senior leaders of Democratic Kampuchea and those most responsible for crimes during the period from 17 April 1975 to 6 January 1979 (Gidley & Gidley, 2019). From 2006 the ECCC carried out investigations across the territory of Cambodia and conducted pre-trial, trial and appeal proceedings. On 1 January 2023, after completing its judicial caseload, the ECCC commenced residual functions for an initial period of three years. During its residual phase, the ECCC would supervise the enforcement of sentences, provide for the protection of victims and witnesses, preserve and manage its archives, and disseminate information to the public, among other functions.

ECCC has completed various investigations of Khmer Rouge top leaders, making them liable for their acts. As a result, a number of Khmer Rouge top leaders were put on trial. The first case completed at the ECCC was that of Kaing Guek Eav, known as "Comrade Duch" during his administration of the infamous Tuol Sleng prison and the Santebal, a special branch of internal security for the Khmer Rouge. He was indicted on July 31, 2007, and went to trial on September 17, 2009. The indictment contained multiple counts of violations of Cambodian law, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. The final decision of the Court Chamber of the ECC regarding Kaing Guek Eav was life imprisonment.

The second top leader investigated was Nuon Chea, Deputy Secretary to Pol Pot, and in charge of Phnom Penh's S-21 torture and interrogation center. He is alleged to have played a crucial role in the genocide during his tenure. He was indicted on multiple counts of violation of Cambodian law, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide on September 15, 2010. Hearings began on June 27, 2011. He denied all charges but was ultimately convicted of crimes against humanity and sentenced to imprisonment for the remainder of his life. He appealed the verdict, but his life sentence was upheld in

November of 2016. This ruling was in the midst of an appeal when Chea died later in 2019.

Also indicted in September 2010 was Ieng Sary, the Deputy Prime Minister for Foreign Affairs for the Khmer Rouge. Ieng is alleged to have been involved with planning and executing the extermination plans of the government and is charged with multiple counts of violations of Cambodian law, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide. The proceedings against Ieng Sary were terminated on March 14, 2013, following his death the same day.

Khieu Samphan's trial began June 27, 2011. Samphan was a high-ranking official and eventually succeeded Pol Pot as leader of the Khmer Rouge in 1987. Samphan was indicted together with Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary, and Ieng Thirith on September 15, 2010 on multiple counts of violation of Cambodian law, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide. He was given a life sentence. He appealed the verdict, but his life sentence was upheld in November of 2016. Samphan was charged with genocide and crimes against humanity in a separate trial that concluded on June 23, 2017. In March 2019, alongside Nuon Chea, Samphan was convicted of crimes against humanity, violations of the Geneva convention, and genocide of the Vietnamese. He was sentenced to life in prison.

Ieng Thirith, the highest-ranking woman in the Khmer Rouge, was the Minister of Social Affairs. The wife of Ieng Sary and sister-in-law of Pol Pot, Ieng Thirith was indicted of multiple counts of violation of Cambodian law, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide on September 15, 2010. Proceedings against Ieng Thirith were suspended and she was conditionally released on September 16, 2012, based on expert testimony that Ieng suffers from dementia, likely Alzheimer's disease, and is not competent to stand trial. She passed away on August 22, 2015.

6.3 The Road to Socio-Economic Recovery

By destroying property, disrupting economic activity, damaging health services, and breaking up families, civil wars in Cambodia specifically, have resulted in deprivations, inhumane living conditions, and severe distress. Indirect and longer term, such as the suffering caused by the destruction of social structures, the undermining of health services, and the disruption of family cohesion. The indirect effects are likely to be widespread and to linger long after the end of conflict. Excessive mortality and forced displacement of people. Disruptive schooling has adverse consequences on long-term labor productivity and economic development. Economic consequences included the destruction of infrastructure and land, the fiscal system, the monetary and financial system, GDP Per Capita.

Cambodia was isolated and put under sanction after the country overthrew a regime that starved its own people to death in 1979. However, humanitarian assistance was made possible through UNICEF and ICRC from 1979 until 1982, costing around 700 million USD. Additionally, UNHCR's emergency relief operation in 1980 provided domestic kits

and rice to voluntary returnees from camps on the Thai border. By 1993, a nearly 7 million USD fund was distributed through Quick Impact Project Programme (QIPs) which provided necessary infrastructure and services to communities where a large number of returnees resided.

Since the 1993 General Election, the government of Cambodia has developed national policies and strategies according to the stages and contexts of the countries' development and political agenda. To begin the process of rebuilding and rehabilitating the social, physical, and institutional infrastructure, the RGC started national development planning, a practice that has retained importance until now and indicates how far the government will intervene in the economy. The first planning measure was to outline the long-term vision for the future in the National Program to Rehabilitate and Develop Cambodia (NPRD) that was adopted in 1994. Based on this vision, the first five-year Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP I - 1996-2000) was formulated setting clear goals and milestones to be reached by 2000. This Plan's focus was on macroeconomic growth, social development, and poverty alleviation. At the same time, a three-year rolling Public Investment Program (PIP) was developed for the period 1996-1998 so that domestic and external development cooperation resources could be channeled into priority areas to achieve the goals set out in SEDP I. Since then, the PIP has been updated annually.

Cambodia's Development Plan is an ambitious one, aiming at an overall 7.5% growth rate per annum. During 1996 – 2000 Cambodia proposed budgets US\$5 billion in total, with about 75% of this expected to be financed from foreign sources. The projected public investment amounts to US\$2.2 billion, of which 65% is earmarked for the rural and 35% for the urban sector. The high priority assigned to the rural sector is commendable, given Cambodian realities and challenges. But plans are one thing, implementation quite another. There are severe constraints, not just because of the extremely weak institutional capacity of the central government, bedeviled by factional rivalry and political violence, but also because significant parts of the countryside remain mined and unfit for productive use, while other parts are still controlled by the Khmer Rouge who, though much weakened, are hoping to return to power (Irvin, 1993).

In the second elected legislature, 1998-2003, among its many problems the government faced the issue of economic recovery. The RGC situated the economy and development more generally within the context of an 'aspiration of reconstruction'. The RGC assisted and cooperated with all key domestic actors including the private sector and civil society. The international community supported the RGC's reforms by providing assistance for implementing the government's Triangular Strategy (TS) for national development. The TS focused on the restoration of peace and security, the integration of Cambodia into the region and the world, and the promotion of socio-economic development.

The economic take-off phase was adopted as a philosophy of the third legislature – 2003-2008 (RGC 2010, 2-3). The second Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP II 2001-2005) focused on economic growth and poverty reduction. One of the most formidable development challenge was and continues to be the development of the private sector as the engine of economic growth. Poverty reduction, improved livelihoods and enhanced quality of life for the rapidly growing Cambodian population were also considered important and closely related to economic growth and development.

The Rectangular Strategy (RS-I) was introduced in 2004 to replace the TS and to drive further reforms for economic growth and poverty reduction. The Strategy consisted of four main axis: social stability; regional and international integration; partnership with the international community and the private sector for the development of the country; and macro-economic development. Good governance featured at the core of the new strategy and focused on four key reform areas (fighting corruption; legal and judicial reform; public administration reform; and armed forces reform and demobilization). Agriculture, infrastructure, employment and development of human resources were the priority sectors identified in the strategy.

Table 1 shows that a socio-economic policy agenda was adopted for the fourth legislative mandate – 2008-2013 – to be implemented through reforming the priority policies for economic growth, social development and further poverty reduction (RGC 2010, 3; MoP 2013,). The RGC in cooperation with key actors used the National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) Update 2009-2013 as a road map to carry out the Rectangular Strategy II (RS-II). The strategy began in an uncertain international environment created by the global financial crisis (GFC).

Table 1: Political Rule and Policy Focus of Cambodian Government 1993 - 2028

Legislature	Area of Focus	Policy Tools
1 st legislature (1993-98)	- Peace-building and Rehabilitation; - Macroeconomic Growth; - Social Development; - Poverty Reduction.	- National Program to Rehabilitate and Develop Cambodia (NPRD); - Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP I, 1996-2000)
2 nd legislature (1998-2003)	- Restoration of Peace and Security; - Regional and International Integration; - Promotion of Socio-economic Development	- Triangular Strategy (TS)

3 rd legislature (2003-08)	- Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction; - Social Stability; - Regional and International Integration; - Private Sector Development	- Economic Development Plan (SEDP II, 2001-05); - Cambodia Millennium Development Goals (CMDGs); - National Poverty Reduction Strategy (NPRS); - Rectangular Strategy I (RS-I) - Sectoral Development Strategy
4 th legislature (2008-13)	- Economic Growth; - Employment - Poverty Reduction; - Social Development	- NSDP (NSDP 2009-13); - Rectangular Strategy (RS-II) - Sectoral Development Strategy
5 th legislature (2013-18)	- Growth; - Employment; - Equity; - Efficiency	- NSDP (2014-18); - Rectangular Strategy (RS-III) - Industrial Development Policy (IDP) (2015-25) - Sectoral Development Strategy
6 th legislation (2019– 2023)	- Growth - Employment - Equity - Efficiency	- Rectangular Strategy (RS-IV) - NSDP (2019 – 2023) - Cambodia SDGs (CSDGs) Framework 2019 – 2030 - Sectoral Development Strategy - Cross-sectoral Development Strategy (social protection, digital economy, etc.)
7 th legislation (2024 – 2028)	- Growth - Employment - Equity - Efficiency - Sustainable Development	- Pentagonal Strategy – Phase I - NSDP (2024 – 2028) - Cambodia SDGs (CSDGs) Framework 2019 – 2030 - Sectoral Development Strategy - Cross-sectoral Development Strategy (social protection, digital economy, etc.)

The most updated socio-economic policy agenda was rectified for the fifth mandate – 2013-2018 – and to implement the Rectangular Strategy Phase III (RS-III) for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency, which guides the activities of all stakeholders to further pursue and strengthen long-term sustainable development aimed at promoting

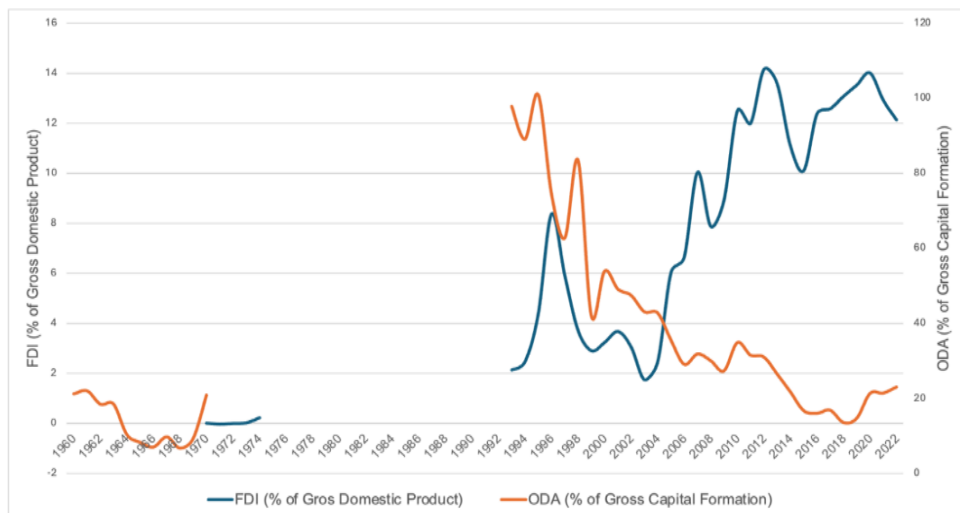
economic growth, creating jobs, equitable distribution of the fruits of growth, and ensuring effectiveness of public institutions and management of resources. It reaffirms the RGC's mission and its strong commitment to sustainable development and poverty reduction (RGC, 2013). The NSDP 2014-2018 is designed for the implementation of the RS-III to reach the status of the upper-middle income countries. It indicates identification of the priorities, indicators and a timeframe for the implementation, and identification of the mechanisms for the Monitoring and Evaluation of the Result Framework, especially setting the responsibility for the line ministries and agencies within each angle in order to gain high benefits from ASEAN Economic Integration by the end of 2015 and to move out of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in coming years and to become an upper-middle-income country by 2030. The last political agenda document is the Rectangular Strategies IV, supported by the NSDP 2019 – 2023 on the same timeframe. The government has synchronized the Cambodian Sustainable Development Framework into the national development strategies as well as sectoral and cross-sectoral policies and strategies. The recent political agenda document, The Pentagonal Strategy Phase I 2024 – 2024 has been promulgated.

7. Cambodia After Achieving Peace

7.1 Economic Development

Perhaps an immediate gain for Cambodia's ending conflict in 1998 was its membership acceptance to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1999, although after the suspension in the previous year. The accession to ASEAN made Cambodia integrated into a market of a combined 10 countries in the Southeast Asia region.

Figure 3: FDI and ODA trends in Cambodia



Source: World Development Indicators

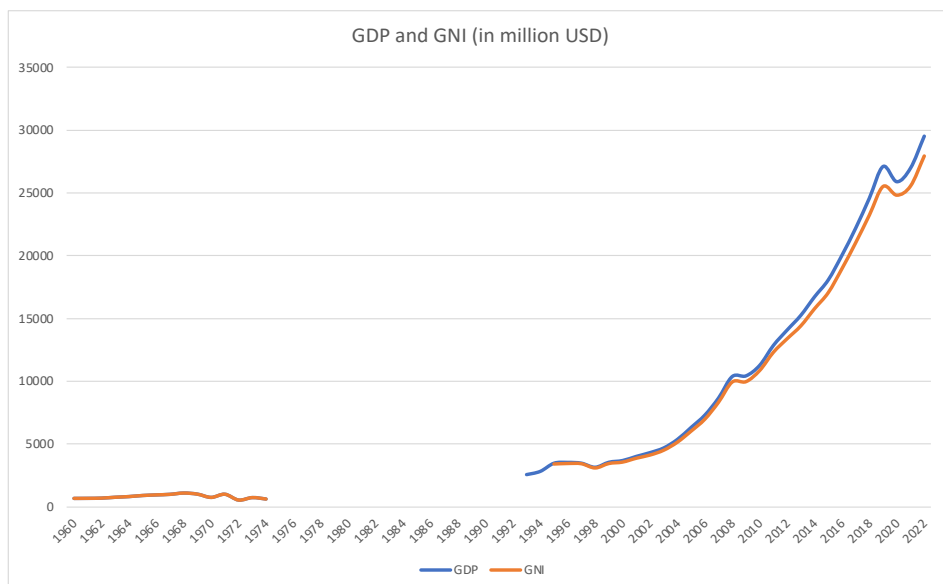
Figure 3 shows the Official Development Assistance (ODA), largely from the US, had played an important role in the economic development of Cambodia especially contributed to infrastructure development during the early Sangkum Reastr Niyom era (Slcomb, 2010). The figure showed that share of ODA to gross capital formation started to decline in the early 1960s and continued to drop negatively in years later. Such a decline can be explained by the divorce of Cambodia-US relation. The figure became positive again in 1970 as the US started provision of aids to Lon Nol government. Until 1993, share of ODA to gross capital formation positioned significantly at 98 percent. The phenomenon can be understood as the international movement especially through the United Nation mission to organize the first general election in Cambodia and rehabilitate the country's economy. Consistent with international trends, share of ODA to gross capital formation has declined over time as Cambodia's economy gradually recover and domestic investment become vibrant. The improved business environment in country has attracted Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).

The figure showed that the share of FDI to gross domestic product has increased from 2 percent in 1993 to 14 percent in 2019. This progress reflected Cambodia's locational advantages, which was insignificant during turbulent period in Cambodia, that appeal to foreign investors. Furthermore, political instability before the general election in 1998 caused a delay in Cambodia's membership in ASEAN (Ashley, 1998). Cambodia's membership in ASEAN and World Trade Organization in 1999 and 2004 respectively, further attracted FDI into the country especially building garment and footwear industry base, thank to trade preference Cambodia received under WTO's most favored nations scheme.

Cambodia has achieved remarkable economic growth in the early 2000s until the global financial crisis in 2009. Foreign direct investment grew substantially, especially after Cambodia's accession to the World Trade organization (WTO) in 2004. However, it is evident that political instability deterred foreign investors who intended to make their investments in the country (Cuyvers et al., 2011).

Cambodia GDP and GDP per capita growth rate has been quite impressive. It is expected that in 2023, GDP per capita will be 1,924 Dollars (MEF, 2023). Inflation rate was kept between 2 and 3 percent until 2021. However, due to COVID-19, it was estimated to rise to 5.0 percent in 2022 and then down to 2.5 percent in 2023. The economic performance in the past has been relatively inclusive and has lifted millions of Cambodians out of poverty. The COVID-19 crisis and the slowdown in the global economy checked Cambodia's growth's fundamentals and negatively affected growth prospects in the medium term, posing the greatest threats to the country's development in the last 30 years. GDP growth, projected between 5.8% to 7% pre-COVID-19, was downwardly adjusted to -3.1 % in 2020.

Figure 4: GDP and GNI growth performance (2000-2021)



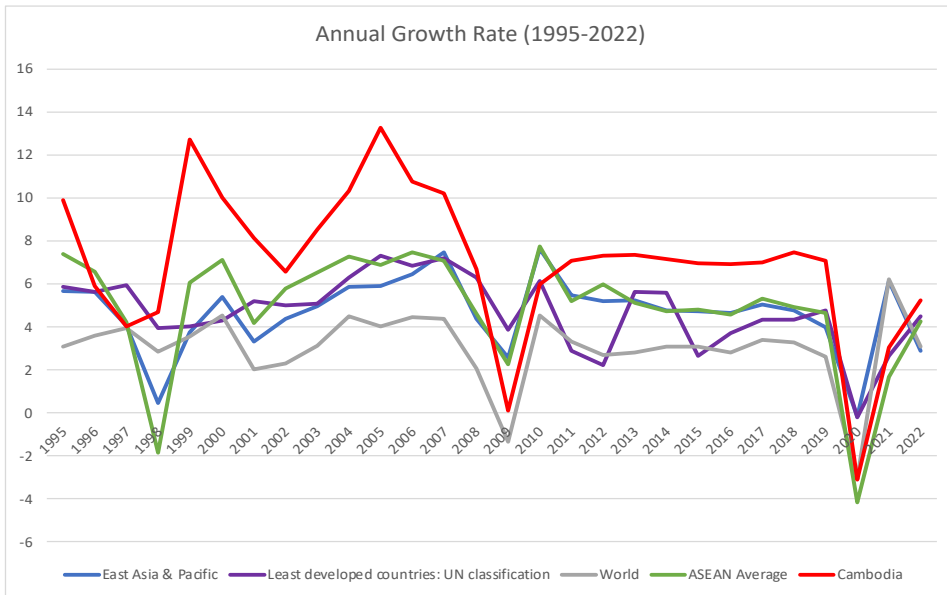
Source: World Development Indicators and MEF's Macroeconomic Framework for 2023 National Budget

The country has started to gradually recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and some of the economic headwinds caused by the global geopolitical issues and rising inflation in 2021. Sustained and rapid development prior to the COVID-19 pandemic advanced Cambodia to a lower-middle-income country status in 2015 and to meet for the first time the criteria to graduate from the LDC category in 2021.

Cambodia has been one of the fastest growth countries. Over the two decades before COVID-19 struck in 2020, Cambodia blossomed economically. Cambodia's economy grew at an average annual rate of 7.6 percent between 1995 and 2019, driven largely by tourism, manufacturing exports, real estate, and construction, making it one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. After reaching lower middle-income status in 2015, it set its sights on becoming an upper middle-income economy by 2030 and higher-income economy by 2050. Over the past two decades, Cambodia has undergone a significant transition, reaching lower middle-income status in 2015 and aspiring to attain upper middle-income status by 2030, according to the World Bank. Driven by garment exports and tourism, Cambodia's economy sustained an average growth rate of 8% between 1998 and 2018, making it one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. While easing slightly, growth remained strong, estimated to have reached 7.1% in 2019, after better-than-expected growth of 7.5% in 2018. Amid the pandemic, the growth lowered to 0.2% in 2020 (expected to rise to 3.6% in 2021). However, EIU revised up its forecast for real

GDP growth in 2022 to 10.5%, from 6.3% previously, based on the assumption that there will be a recovery in private consumption and investment that year.

Figure 5: Cambodia's economic growth performance (1995-2022)



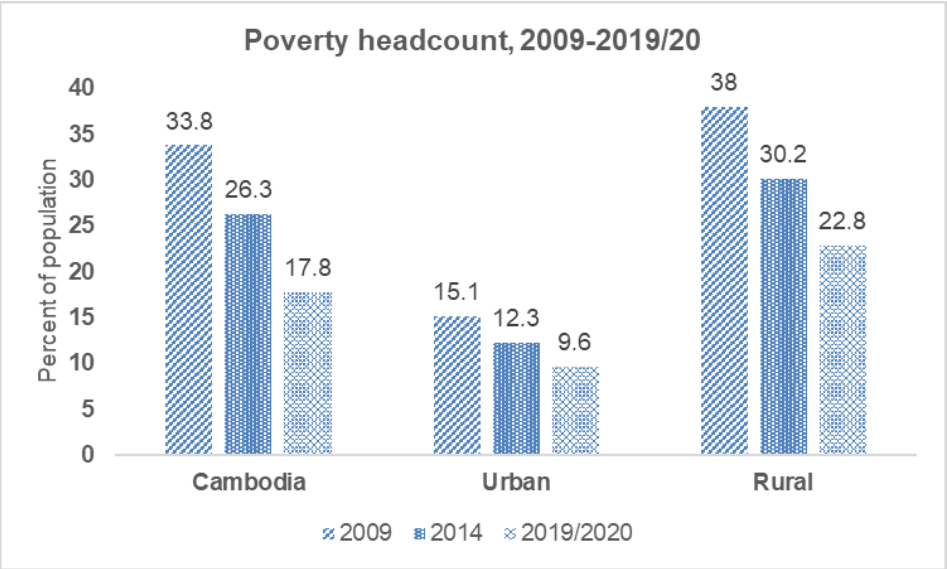
Source: World Development Indicators

7.2 Poverty Reduction

Cambodia's national poverty rate fell by almost half between 2009 and 2019. Cambodia's poverty rate dropped from 33.8 percent to 17.8 percent over the ten-year period to 2019/2020, with almost 2 million Cambodians escaping poverty. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has recently reversed some of the progress made. COVID-19 exposed Cambodia's pre-existing economic vulnerabilities. Many Cambodian households were in a precarious position before the pandemic. Cambodia's rapid economic growth from 2009 to 2019, combined with structural change, helped to increase labor earnings and to reduce poverty. Living standards have improved, helping Cambodia to narrow urban-rural gaps; but low-income and rural households still lag behind in access to basic services and earning opportunities. Cambodia's remarkable economic growth and poverty reduction took place in an environment characterized by macroeconomic stability and prudent fiscal management. Cambodia's growing economy has sustained high employment rates and income growth, while slower population growth has further helped boost per capita incomes. Structural transformation has been crucial to the success in poverty reduction. Investment and trade spurred Cambodia's structural transformation away from agriculture towards higher value-added activities. Cambodian workers are moving from agriculture to jobs in manufacturing and services, sectors with higher

productivity and better wages. Workers are not only moving across sectors, but also from rural areas to towns and cities. The growth in non-farm labor earnings is the chief factor in poverty reduction. During COVID-19, the government used the existing “IDPoor” registry to deliver relief cash transfers to registered households. Cash transfers provided valuable income support to poor households during the pandemic and curbed the increase in poverty and inequality. Although assistance was rapidly scaled up, there is room for improvement in cash transfer coverage.

Figure 6: Poverty rate (2009-2014)



Source: World Bank, 2021

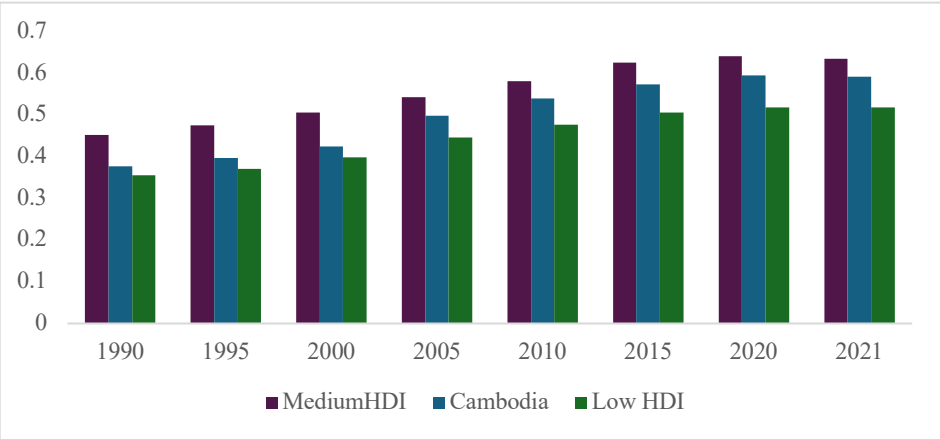
7.3 Human Development

Cambodia’s human development has improved steadily since the 1990. Cambodia's Human Development Index value for 2021 is 0.6, which put the country in the Medium human development category. Cambodia emerged as one of the fastest-growing economies in the world during the last two decades (1998 to 2019), maintaining an average growth rate of around 7 percent until the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thanks to this economic performance, the country has made notable improvements in key human development dimensions between 1990 and 2021, namely: GNI (gross national income) per capita increasing fourfold from US\$1,008 to US\$4,079, when adjusted by purchasing power parity (PPP); Life expectancy increasing by more than 14 years to surpass the age of 70; Mean years of schooling growing by 2.4 years increasing from 2.7 to 5.1 years on average; With these improvements in income, health, and education, the country’s Human Development Index (HDI) has increased by 56.9 percent, reaching the medium human development category, and bringing Cambodia to a ranking of 146 among

191 countries in 2023. This progress has also contributed to reducing its Multidimensional Poverty Index. Cambodia’s MPI value fell from 0.17 in 2014 to 0.07 in 2021/2022, and the incidence of poverty dropped from about 37 percent to 17 percent. This means that multidimensional poverty was halved in 7.5 years.

Figure 7: Human Development Index 1990 onwards



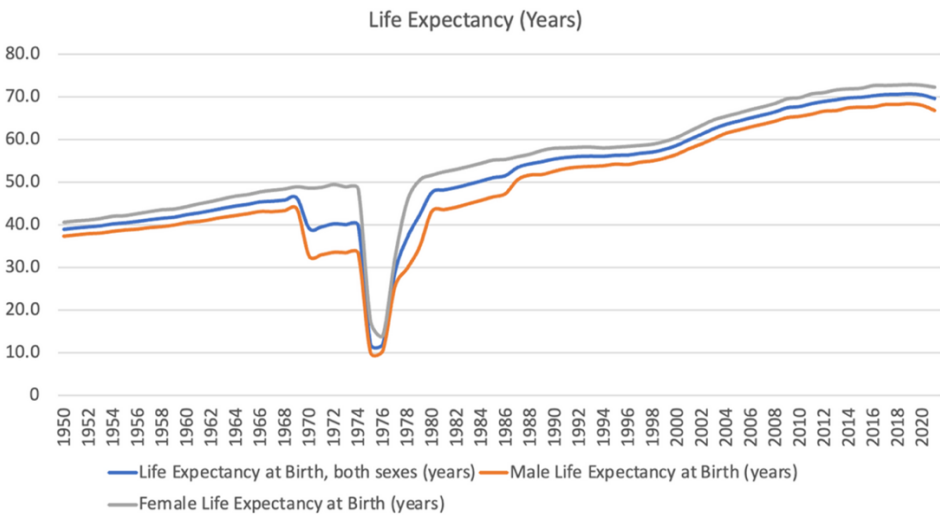
Source: UNDP HDI data (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/data>)

Figure 7 shows the comparative analysis of the Human Development Index (HDI) for Cambodia against the averages of Medium HDI and Low HDI countries from 1990 to 2021. The HDI is a composite index measuring average achievement in key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, knowledge, and a decent standard of living. In 1990, Cambodia's HDI was around 0.35, which was slightly below the Medium HDI average of approximately 0.4 but higher than the Low HDI average of about 0.3. By 1995, Cambodia's HDI had marginally increased, maintaining its position between the Medium and Low HDI averages. From 2000 onwards, Cambodia demonstrated a steady upward trend in HDI. In 2000, Cambodia's HDI approached 0.45, still lagging behind the Medium HDI average but remaining above the Low HDI average. This trend continued through 2005 and 2010, with Cambodia's HDI consistently improving, reflecting advancements in health, education, and income. By 2015, Cambodia's HDI had risen to nearly 0.55, showing substantial progress while still trailing the Medium HDI average. The upward trajectory persisted through 2020 and 2021, with Cambodia's HDI nearing 0.6 in 2021. Despite this significant improvement, Cambodia's HDI remained below the Medium HDI average but comfortably above the Low HDI average.

Overall, the graph illustrates Cambodia's remarkable progress in human development over three decades. The consistent increase in Cambodia's HDI underscores the country's efforts in improving the quality of life for its citizens. However, the gap between

Cambodia's HDI and the Medium HDI average indicates that there is still room for further development.

Figure 8: Life Expectancy (1950-2020)



Source: UN Database

Figure 8 highlights the significant impact of political and social upheaval on life expectancy in Cambodia during the 1970s. Despite this, the overall trend from 1950 to 2020 is one of improvement, with substantial gains in life expectancy for both sexes, males, and females, reflecting improvements in healthcare, living conditions, and overall quality of life in Cambodia over the decades. The life expectancy at birth has increased steadily over 70 years in 2020, almost double from 1950. During the decade of 1970s, four different regimes succeeded one another in the context of wars. Mortality increased considerably, not only from the resulting wars casualties and political execution but also from degradation of living condition that culminated in a severe famine in 1979 (Heuveline, 1998).

From 1950 to around 1970, life expectancy for both sexes, males, and females shows a gradual increase. In 1950, the life expectancy for both sexes was approximately 40 years. This period demonstrates a steady upward trend, reaching about 45 years by the early 1970s. During this time, female life expectancy was consistently higher than male life expectancy. A significant decline in life expectancy is observed in the mid-1970s. This sharp drop is particularly pronounced in the female life expectancy, which plummeted to around 15 years, while male life expectancy also declined sharply. This decline was attributed by Cambodian Civil War and the Khmer Rouge regime, which had devastating effects on the population. Following the drastic decline in the 1970s, life expectancy

began to recover in the early 1980s. By 1980, life expectancy for both sexes had rebounded to around 40 years, continuing to rise steadily thereafter. The recovery was robust, with life expectancy for both sexes reaching around 70 years by 2020. Female life expectancy consistently remained higher than male life expectancy throughout this period, with females reaching about 72 years in 2020 compared to males at approximately 68 years.

8. Case Study

Box 1: Kep Case Study: Benefits of Ending Conflicts in Kampot and Kep

In order to understand the conflict ending strategies and the impact of ending internal conflicts, a case study was conducted in Kep and Kampot. A group of students led by principal researchers presented the findings from document analysis and interviews with high level provincial and city government officials

Internal conflict spread across Cambodia even after 1979 when The Khmer Rouge Regime was overthrown from power. However, the conflict did not end there due to the fact that some provinces and areas were still not liberated and there were Khmer Rouge armies spreading across those spots waiting to attack the enemies that entered their areas and continuously made attempts to expand their territories. This means that peace did not entirely appear across the country until 1998 under The Win-Win Policy which integrated the remaining Khmer Rouge armies with The Royal Cambodian Army (Heuveline, 1998) Before this integration, Kampot and Kep were one of the provinces that were one of the most intense and harsh areas that they kept on fighting even though their leader was overthrown in 1979.

Specifically, Kep was one of the bloodiest areas and strongholds of the Khmer Rouge, it has turned out to be one of the tourist attractions with beautiful beaches, homestays, mountains, plants, and many other attractions.

Kep was connected to Phnom Voar, where the last Khmer Rouge was housed. The area had quite a traumatizing and devastating history because there were many dead soldiers from the war, left over with many landmines underground that affected many citizens in the area. During 1994 and 1998, the Khmer Rouge appeared in the region to rob people in the villages and passersby. There were also cases of killing of foreigners, particularly three foreigners of German, British, and French nationals were captured and killed in 1996. Therefore, the lives of dwellers in the area were extremely miserable due to disturbance from the Khmer Rouge. There were very few tourists coming to Kep and all economic activities, including farming, were disrupted.

By applying the Win-Win Policy, the last Khmer Rouge stronghold fell, and full peace was claimed. It is worth noting that there are three key strategic points having been put forward in the Win-Win Policy. First, the lives of everyone were ensured. Second, positions of the Khmer Rouge officials, except the top leaders, were guaranteed and properties assured. The policy was very effective as more and more remaining Khmer Rouge difftracted to join the government. Eventually, Phnom Voar stronghold was integrated.

After the integration, the relationship of people from both sides started to grow. Along with the government, NGOs came to the area to help develop. Until 2022 Kep was officially announced as a province that successfully removed all landmines that were left from the war, especially the Phnom Voar area which was very intense and bloody. This is one of the greatest achievements not only for the governments, but especially for the citizens because they can finally walk without fear of stepping on the landmines. According to Som Piseth, Governor of Kep Province, there were 221 victims of landmines until 2021. Currently, not only Kep, but also Phnom Voar has become one of the eco-tourist areas that potentially could attract many foreigners to visit their spectacular nature without any fear or worries of the danger of stepping into this area.

Source: Interviews with Officials in Kampot and Kep

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

Internal conflicts had a destructive impact on economic and social development. They took people's lives, disrupted economic growth and destroyed social systems such as trust. Internal conflicts were caused by factors such as socioeconomic inequality, ideological political and social structure and ethnic racial polarization. Ending internal conflicts have been challenging for nations. However, Cambodia succeeded in doing so, by gradually bringing all relevant parties in the conflicts and eventually established the tribunal court. Ending the internal conflicts would bring about peace and prosperity.

Recommendations

It is apparent that Cambodia has been integrated, governed by single effective government legitimized by elections, and armed rebellion has ceased to exist since 1998. To sustain peace and stability that are crucial to development of Cambodia for years to come and reduce conflict risk, efforts should be given to:

- Sustain positive economic growth: economic growth allows states to cumulate resources and strengthen capacity which will deter armed rebellions. To sustain economic growth, special attention should be paid to promoting sustainable private investments, domestic consumption, and value-added exports.

- Promote equitable and resilient growth: equitable growth ensures all people benefit from economic development and narrow inequality gap while resilience protects economy from shocks that could potentially contribute to increasing poverty and inequality gap. This will ultimately reduce conflict risk. Equitable growth can be achieved by progressive taxation, promoting educational attainment and skills acquisition, and reducing corruption, while resilience can be attained by diversification, disaster preparedness, social protection.
- Continue to strengthen social protection system: social protection ensures people will not fall back into poverty that increases their incentive to rebel. This can be done by expanding social protection coverage that is inclusive over disadvantaged and vulnerable groups without discrimination of political, racial, and religious backgrounds.
- All in all, to maintain peace, it is essential to promote inclusive development; reduce inequalities between groups; tackle unemployment; and, via national and international control over illicit trade, reduce private incentives to fight.

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Cities Planning in the Coastal Provinces of Cambodia

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Abstract

Urban planning involves the design, regulation, and development of urban spaces to ensure sustainable growth and livable environments. In Cambodia's coastal provinces, urbanization remains a pressing concern as city plans for districts and Sangkat/communes remain incomplete, delaying sustainable development efforts. This report identifies challenges in the city planning process and proposes actionable recommendations for improvement. It begins by reviewing national and international policies, including those of Cambodia, Singapore, and Japan, to establish benchmarks for evaluating city planning practices. Findings from consultative meetings in Kampot and Kep provinces further validate the challenges faced by sub-national administrations in adopting and implementing city plans. The report highlights similarities between Cambodia's regulatory frameworks and those of advanced systems in Singapore and Japan, identifying best practices that can be adapted locally. Finally, the paper offers short-, medium-, and long-term recommendations for completing and enhancing city planning in the coastal provinces, emphasizing collaboration between government, private sector, civil society, and communities to achieve inclusive and sustainable urbanization

Note: This policy research paper is the collaboration between the Ministry of land Management Urban Planning and Construction & National University of Management

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1. Introduction

1.1 Rationale

According to World Bank Group, 21% of the population in Cambodia lived in urban areas in 2017 and this number is expected to rise to 36% in the year 2050.³⁰ While the migration rate of rural-to-rural areas (50.9%) was higher than that of rural-to-urban areas (27.5%) in 2008, the 2019 Census showed a remarkable change in urbanization process in Cambodia as the migration rate of rural-to-urban areas is 37.5%, which is comparatively higher than that of rural-to-rural areas (27.1%) and that of urban-to-rural areas (6.3%).³¹ According to the General Population Census of 2019, the total population in Cambodia reached 15.5 million.³² In the same year, the Census showed that people living in urban areas, excluding foreign residents, across the country were more than 6.1 million, including the population of Phnom Penh, the Capital City of Cambodia, which was approximately more than 1.3 million.³³

Cambodia defines urban area based on the population size (excess of 2,000 inhabitants), population density (exceeding 200 persons per square kilometer) and percentage of employment in non-agricultural occupations (excess of 50 %).³⁴ The term “city” in this paper refers to capital, municipality or populated area. The status of a city or municipality in Cambodia is recognized by the government in the form of Sub-decree.

Law on Land Management, Urbanization and Construction which was promulgated in 1994 requires for the adoption of master plan for management and development of the capital, provinces and municipalities.³⁵ In addition, Sub-decree on Urbanization of Capital, City and Urban Areas adopted in 2015 requires that urbanization must adhere to a number of principles, including taking the urban physical plan as a basis for urban development, urban conservation, land development, infrastructure development and all kinds of construction, as well as integration to make land use in the right, efficient, sustainable, balanced and equitable manner.³⁶ Urban physical plans or city plans consist of master plan on land use, land use plan and detailed plan of urbanization. The Ministry of Land Management, Urbanization and Construction demonstrated 15 policy priorities. One of which is urban development through urban development planning at municipals, districts, Khans, communes and Sangkat in capital and provinces of the Kingdom of Cambodia.³⁷ This policy

³⁰ World Bank Group, Urban Development in Phnom Penh (2017), visited on 31 August 2024 at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/cambodia/publication/urban-development-in-phnom-penh>.

³¹ National Institute of Statistics, Ministry of Planning, General Population Census of the Kingdom of Cambodia 2019 (National Report on Final Census), p.74 (2020)

³² *Id.* at p.147.

³³ *Id.* at p.22 & 72.

³⁴ *Id.* at p. 9.

³⁵ Law on Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction, Royal Code No. 04/NS/94, art. 5 (1994).

³⁶ Urbanization of Capital, Sub-Decree on City and Urban Area, No. 42, art. 5 (2015).

³⁷ The 15 priority policies of the Ministry of Land Management, Urbanization and Construction include (1) making policies, (2) preparing legal frameworks, (3) building modern public institution and administrations, (4) improving modern public services and data management, (5) land registration, (6) land management, (7) urban development, (8) contemporary Khmer architecture, (9) housing work, (10) inspection and internal audit, (11) housing, social land concession, (12) framework for international cooperation, (13) human resource development, (14) risk awareness, (15) political security and economic security affairs.

priority well aligns with Pentagonal Strategies (Phase I) which focuses on strengthening the management and modernization of urbanization.³⁸

The coastline of Cambodia is approximately 440 kilometer-long, covering 4 provinces in the south-west part of the country. These provinces, including Preah Sihanouk Province, Kampot Province, Kep Province and Koh Kong Province, are famous for tourists because they are by the sea with beautiful beaches and rich in nature biodiversity and priceless natural environment, ecology, economy, society, culture and local traditions, and tourism attractions. During the closing ceremony of the 10th Sea Festival (Round 3) on December 3, 2023 in Kep Province, Samdech Moha Borvor Thipadei HUN MANET, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Cambodia made an insightful recommendation on the master plan for the development of the 4 coastal provinces to ensure the value of long-term development plan based on the potentials of each province and to ensure non-competition among the four provinces.³⁹ For example, the government's ambition to develop Sihanouk Province into a multipurpose model Special Economic zone by currently working on the master plan. The multi-purpose SEZ aims to become a major economic zone in Southeast Asia that is empowered by smart technology, as well as an advanced industrial zone serving regional and global production chains.

Urbanization in Cambodia poses several challenges, including pollution, and securing access to decent jobs, affordable housing, and other basic services for urban inhabitants.⁴⁰ Coastal areas are affected by climate change. For example, in Kampot and Koh Kong provinces, negative impacts of climate change include the rise of temperatures, extreme rainfall, flooding, droughts, and sea-level rise which cause a considerable concern on food security, health care and lack of water resources.⁴¹

Cambodia's coastal areas have played a crucial role in driving the country's economic development. However, recent coastal developments have faced widespread criticism from both public and private stakeholders. Large-scale land-use decisions, particularly those related to the gaming industry and land concessions, have often been made informally, without comprehensive planning, stakeholder consultation, or consideration of long-term environmental and socioeconomic impacts

³⁸ Royal Government of Cambodia, *Pentagonal Strategies-Phase I for Growth, Employment, Equity, Efficiency and Sustainability: Building the Foundation Towards Realizing the Cambodia Vision 2050* (2023). This policy consists of 5 Pentagons and each Pentagon comprise of 5 Side. Regarding Pentagon 4, Side 1 is about optimization of demographic dividends, strengthening demographic resilience and promotion of gender equality. Side 2 is about sustainable management of natural resource, cultural heritages and tourism. Side 3 is about promotion of agriculture and rural development. Side 4 is about strengthening of management and modernization of urbanization. Side 5 is about ensuring environmental sustainability, and readiness for responding to climate change, as well promotion of green economy.

³⁹ *Samdech Moha Borvor Thipadei Hun Manet Provides Principles for Planning the Development of the Four Seaside Provinces to Ensure the Value of Long-Term Development, Avoid Competition Leading to Loss of Common Interest*, Fresh News, 03 December 2023, available at <https://freshnewsasia.com/index.php/en/localnews/319824-2023-12-03-12-00-51.html>, last visited 22 December 2023.

⁴⁰ UN-HABITAT Cambodia, *2023 Cambodia Country Report* (2023), Available at <https://fukuoka.unhabitat.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/2.-Cambodia-Country-Report-16-Pages-final.pdf>, last visited 24 November 2024.

⁴¹ *Id.*

(World Bank 2021).⁴² This lack of structured investment and planning has led to significant challenges, especially in Sihanoukville, which is now widely regarded as a failed case of urban development. The rapid, uncoordinated expansion has left the city dotted with over 300 unfinished buildings, a stark reminder of poor investment management and inadequate urban planning.⁴³ These issues highlight the urgent need for a more thoughtful approach to urbanization that balances social, economic, and environmental factors. To avoid repeating these mistakes, future development must prioritize comprehensive planning, community involvement, and sustainable practices to ensure long-term success and positive outcomes for the region.

1.2 Research problem

Urban planning contributes to resilient, sustainable and inclusive development of cities and urban areas in Cambodia.⁴⁴ Urbanization must adhere to master plan on land use, land use plan and detailed urbanization plan. Due to complexities of urbanization, adoption of the said urban physical plans with long-term visions cannot be accomplished overnight or in a short period of time.⁴⁵ The common consequences of unplanned urbanization might be enlargement of urban sprawl, ineffective land use via change from agricultural land to residential land, environmental damage, residence settlements within areas with potential natural disasters, increase of construction and need for infrastructure and public services.⁴⁶ Based on the literature review, the master plans on land use at most of the cities in Cambodia, including the cities at the coastal provinces, do not layout the plan on land use and detailed urbanization plan as guideline for city development.

1.3 Objective

The paper aims to provide policy recommendation on adopting of physical plans of cities or city plans at the coastal provinces by presenting city planning concepts and processes in Singapore and Japan. By doing so, the objectives of the study are three-pronged.

1. To review the key concepts or framework related to sustainable urban planning;

⁴² The World Bank, Building a Blue Economy Roadmap for Cambodia (2023), available at <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099556207032341413/pdf/IDU00e6c67aa0872b04096088cd02fda633553f1.pdf>, last visit 22 November 2024.

⁴³ *A city transformed: Over 1,000 high-rise buildings built or in progress in Sihanoukville*, Khmer Times, 19 October 2023, available at <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501378991/a-city-transformed-over-1000-high-rise-buildings-built-or-in-progress-in-sihanoukville/>, last visited 21 November 2024.

⁴⁴ Pentagonal strategies-Phase I comprises of 5 Pentagons and each Pentagon comprise of 5 Side. Regarding Pentagon 4, Side 1 is about optimization of demographic dividends, strengthening demographic resilience and promotion of gender equality. Side 2 is about sustainable management of natural resource, cultural heritages and tourism. Side 3 is about promotion of agriculture and rural development. Side 4 is about strengthening of management and modernization of urbanization. Side 5 is about ensuring environmental sustainability, and readiness for responding to climate change, as well promotion of green economy.

⁴⁵ Urbanization of Capital, City and Urban Area, *Supra* note 7, Art. 5.

⁴⁶ Presentation material of the General Department of Land Management and Urban Planning, Ministry of Land Management, Urbanization and Construction, during the Second Cambodian Urban and Housing Forum, under the theme “Smart, Green, Resilient, and Inclusive Cities” at the Ministry of Land Management, Urbanization and Construction from (30-31 May 2024).

2. To explore the existing laws, policies and regulations related to the physical urban planning in the coastal zones in Cambodia;
3. To explore the challenges and opportunity for developing sustainable cities in the coastal zones in Cambodia.
4. To review case studies and draw recommendations for developing sustainable urban development planning for Cambodia's coastal provinces.

1.4 Methodologies

The study employed the qualitative method of data collection and analysis, which includes (i) desk review and analysis of policies and regulations on urban planning; (ii) collecting and reviewing city plans of the coastal provinces; (iii) reviewing the case studies of city planning in Singapore and Japan; and (iv) consultative meetings with senior provincial officials and experts in Kampot province and Kep province in the early of March 2024. The consultative meetings were conducted with the support from the MLMUC. There were more than 40 participants in each meeting. The senior provincial officials made a presentation on key consideration and process of city planning in the provinces. Certain challenges were also discussed during the meetings.

1.5 Significances of the paper

Urbanization is a global trend and development of the cities and urban areas has become a topic for international, regional and national principles and policies agenda. This is because urban areas are centers of economic, social and cultural activities which impose potential challenges on housing, food supply, energy supply, management and use of natural resources, infrastructures, transportations, health, safety, education, employment, waste management and environmental issues. Recently, the Royal Government of Cambodia issued a Sub-decree on 28 August 2024 to establish a new city named Komponentsom city in addition to existing cities such as Preah Sihanouk city and Koh Rong City at Preah Sihanouk province.⁴⁷ This new city remarks the urban expansion at coastal region in which there are 7 cities in total, which include 3 cities in Preah Sihanouk province, 2 cities in Kampot Province and 1 city in Koh Kong province and 1 city in Kep province. In this scenario, the city planning is desperately needed for the new city and as well as other cities of the coastal provinces which do not have complete urban physical plans. This report highlights key concepts and procedures together with lessons learned from Japan and Singapore.

1.6 Scope of the paper

This paper mainly focuses on the concepts and processes on adoption of the city plans or physical urban plans which include master plan on land use, land use plan and detailed urban plans of the 6 cities in the coastal provinces.⁴⁸ This paper does not discuss the development plans adopted for

⁴⁷ Royal Government of Cambodia, Sub-Decree on Establishment of Komponentsom City of Preah Sihanouk Province, No. 201 (2024). This new city has 5 Sangkats and Sangkat Ream is a administrative location.

⁴⁸ Master plan on land use of Komponentsom city is not discussed in this report.

specific sectors or sub-national administration at capital, provincial, municipal, district, Khan, commune and Sangkat levels.⁴⁹

2.1 Conceptual Framework for Analyzing Sustainable Urban Planning

Conceptual framework for analyzing sustainable urbanization development can be drawn from various sources. Currently, various international and regional organizations have recommended the framework or indicator related to sustainable cities. Table 1 depicts key concepts of each framework.

2.1 SDG11: UN Sustainable Cities and Communities

On 25 September 2015, the United Nations adopted a resolution on transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.⁵⁰ According to this resolution, there are 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); and among which, Goal 11 is to “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.”⁵¹ The UN Sustainable Cities and Communities framework emphasizes the critical role of urban planning and infrastructure in addressing housing, transportation, and resource efficiency. Central themes include disaster risk reduction and environmental conservation, such as green public spaces and heritage preservation. This framework prioritizes policies for inclusive growth and resilience-building, especially in the least developed countries. The focus on sustainability ensures that urbanization addresses immediate societal needs while safeguarding future generations through long-term resource efficiency and resilience.

2.2 New Urban Agenda

On 23 December 2016, the United Nations endorsed the New Agenda regarding the QUITO Declaration on Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements for All by implementing the interlinked principles that leave no one behind (social sustainability), ensure sustainable and inclusive urban economies (economic sustainability), and ensure environmental sustainability.⁵² The New Urban Agenda builds upon social, economic, and environmental sustainability, adding spatial sustainability to its goals. This approach seeks to balance urban growth with the preservation of

⁴⁹ A five-year development plan that must be updated annually in accordance with the three-year rolling investment program is required under Law on Management of Capital-Province-Municipal-Khan Administration, dated 28 May 2008, Articles 36-41. Law on Commune-Sangkat Administration, dated 19 March 2001, article 60 stipulates that Commune / Sangkat councils must prepare, approve and implement the commune / Sangkat development plan in order to determine the vision of the program and the development of the commune / Sangkat.

⁵⁰ The United Nations, Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, p. 14 (2015), available at <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n15/291/89/pdf/n1529189.pdf?token=x4sNAeCyQUHsQFvQD1&fe=true>, last visited 04 April 2024.

⁵¹ *Id.* p. 21-22. The Goal 11 specifically consider on Housing; transportation; urbanization; world’s cultural and natural heritage; natural disaster; environmental effect; green and public space; national and regional development planning; policies for inclusive; resource efficiency, and disaster risk reduction; support least development country in sustainable development and resilience building.

⁵² The New Urban Agenda was adopted at the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in Quito, Ecuador, on 20 October 2016. The New Urban Agenda was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly at its sixty-eighth plenary meeting of the seventy-first session on 23 December 2016.

cultural and ecological systems, encouraging cities to align their development goals with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The emphasis on inclusivity and equity ensures that urban expansion does not exacerbate inequality, promoting accessible public spaces, housing, and opportunities for all citizens.

2.3 UNESCO Creative Cities Network

The UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) underscores the role of creativity in urban development.⁵³ It focuses on fostering cooperation among cities that integrate creativity as a pillar of sustainable economic, social, and cultural growth. Covering seven creative fields—Crafts and Folk Art, Design, Film, Gastronomy, Literature, Media Arts, and Music—the UCCN highlights how cultural industries can drive urban innovation and community engagement. This initiative positions cultural creativity as a strategic asset for enhancing urban identity and economic diversification.

2.4 ASEAN Sustainable Urbanization Strategy

In 2018, the Secretariat of Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) adopted the ASEAN Sustainable Urbanization Strategy aiming to build sustainable and livable cities in ASEAN.⁵⁴ The ASEAN Sustainable Urbanization Strategy addresses urbanization through multiple lenses, including civic and social dimensions, health and well-being, quality environment, built infrastructure, and industry and innovation. A notable aspect is its attention to equitable growth and personal security, emphasizing sanitation, water management, and urban resilience. The focus on mobility and education supports the integration of urban planning with human resource development, fostering sustainable cities that prioritize human-centric design and innovation.

2.5 ASEAN Smart Cities Framework

The ASEAN Smart Cities Framework complements these concepts by integrating technology and governance into urbanization.⁵⁵ It addresses civic and social cohesion, public safety, and cybersecurity while focusing on health, education, and environmental sustainability. Key priorities include urban resilience, clean energy, and sustainable infrastructure development. Additionally,

⁵³ UNESCO, Creative Cities Network, (2024), Mission Statement available at https://www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2023/03/UCCN%20Mission%20Statement_rev2023.pdf , last visited 21 November 2024.

⁵⁴ Secretariat of the Association of South-east Asian Nations, The ASEAN Sustainable Strategy (2018), available at <https://asean.org/book/asean-sustainable-urbanisation-strategy/> , last visited 05 May 2024. The strategy has 6 priority policies which include civic & social (inclusive & equitable growth); health & well-being (housing & home); security (personal safety & security); quality environment (water, waste & sanitation); built infrastructure (mobility & urban resilience); industry & innovation (education).

⁵⁵ ASEAN Smart Cities Network, ASEAN Smart Cities Framework (2018), available at <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/ASCN-ASEAN-Smart-Cities-Framework.pdf> , last visited 21 November 2024.

the framework promotes industry and innovation through entrepreneurship, trade, and upskilling initiatives, ensuring cities adapt to evolving economic landscapes.

All in all, urbanization frameworks highlight common principles: sustainability, inclusivity, and resilience. While the UN Sustainable Cities and Communities and New Urban Agenda prioritize broad policy frameworks and infrastructure, initiatives like the UCCN and ASEAN strategies emphasize specific aspects, such as creativity and technological innovation. Together, these approaches provide a comprehensive understanding of urbanization, balancing traditional development with modern demands for smart, sustainable cities.

Table 2: Contemporary Sustainable Urban Planning Frameworks

UN Sustainable Cities and Communities	New Urban Agenda	UNESCO Creative Cities Network	ASEAN Sustainable Urbanization Strategy	ASEAN Smart Cities Framework
Housing; transportation; urbanization; world’s cultural and natural heritage; natural disaster; environmental effect; green and public space; national and regional development planning; policies for inclusive; resource efficiency, and disaster risk reduction; support least development country in sustainable development and resilience building	Social sustainability; economic sustainability, environmental sustainability and spatial sustainability	It aims to strengthen cooperation with and among cities that have recognized creativity as a strategic factor of sustainable development as regards economic, social, cultural and environmental aspects. It covers seven creative fields: Crafts and Folk Art, Design, Film, Gastronomy, Literature, Media Arts, and Music.	Civic & social (inclusive & equitable growth); health & well-being (housing & home); security (personal safety & security); quality environment (water, waste & sanitation); built infrastructure (mobility & urban resilience); industry & innovation (education)	Civic & social (social cohesion, culture and heritage, tourism, public and municipal services, governance); health & well-being (housing & home, healthcare, education); security (resource security, cybersecurity, public safety, city surveillance and crime protection personal); quality environment (clean environment, resource access and management, urban resilience); built infrastructure (utilities, mobility and transportation, buildings and construction); industry & innovation

Source: Authors’ compilation based on various sources

3. Urban Planning at Coastal Provinces

The coastline of Cambodia is approximately 440 kilometer-long and located within 4 provinces in the south-west part of Cambodia. Koh Kong Province has longest coastline of 237 kilometers and

total administrative territory size of 10,045.58 square kilometers, divided into 1 city, 6 districts, 26 communes and 3 Sangkat with the population of 143,492.⁵⁶ Preah Sihanouk province has coastline of 110 kilometers and total land size of 2,658.90 square kilometers, divided into 3 cities, 3 districts, 18 communes and 11 Sangkat with the population of 310,072.⁵⁷ Kampot Province has the coastline of 67 kilometers and total land size of 4,873.20 square kilometers, divided into 2 cities and 7 districts, 85 communes and 8 Sangkat with population of 593,829.⁵⁸ Kep province is the smallest city in Cambodia with the total land size of, 187.24 square kilometers, divided into 1 city, 1 district, 2 communes and 3 Sangkat with the total population of 42,665. It has the shortest coastline of 26 kilometers.⁵⁹

Table 2 describes the population trend in the four provinces. In Preah Sihanouk Province, the urban population was remarkably high at 100% in 1998, with a total population of 155,690. However, by 2008, this figure dropped sharply to 41%, even as the total population increased to 221,396. By 2019, the urban population rebounded to 73%, though the total population slightly declined to 219,865. This fluctuation suggests dynamic changes in settlement patterns and urban classifications over time.

Kampot Province showed consistently low levels of urbanization throughout the observed years. In 1998, only 6% of its population (528,405 people) was urban. This increased marginally to 8% in 2008, alongside a rise in total population to 585,850. By 2019, the urban population reached 10%, with the total population growing slightly to 588,066. These figures reflect Kampot's predominantly rural character and slow urbanization progress over the decades.

For Koh Kong Province, urbanization showed steady growth. In 1998, 22% of its population (132,106 people) was urban. By 2008, this had risen to 31%, despite a decrease in the total population to 117,481. In 2019, urbanization increased further to 46%, with the total population rebounding slightly to 122,883. This trend indicates a gradual but significant shift toward urban living in Koh Kong over the years.

Kep province lacked data for 1998, making it difficult to assess earlier trends. However, by 2008, 13% of its population was urban, with a total population of 35,753. By 2019, urbanization had surged to 79%, while the total population rose modestly to 41,539. This sharp increase in urban population percentage suggests rapid development and urban growth in Kep during this period.

⁵⁶ Ministry of Interior, Information Book on Capital and Provinces (in Khmer), p. 91-92 (2024).

⁵⁷ *Id.* p. 173-174. At the date of this report, another city called "Komponentsom" was established pursuant to Sub-decree No. 201, dated 28 August 2024, on Establishment of Komponentsom City of Preah Sihanouk Province. This new city has 5 Sangkats which were formerly the 5 communes of and Sangkat Ream is a administrative location.

⁵⁸ Information Book on Capital and Provinces (in Khmer), *Supra* note, p. 68-69.

⁵⁹ *Infra* note 29, p. 221-222.

Table 3: Urban population trends in the four provinces

Provinces	1998		2008		2019	
	Urban	Total	Urban	Total	Urban	Total
Preah Sihanouk	100%	155,690	41%	221,396	73%	219,865
Kampot	6%	528,405	8%	585,850	10%	588,066
Koh Kong	22%	132,106	31%	117,481	46%	122,883
Kep	N/A	N/A	13%	35,753	79%	41,539

Source: General Population Census of the Kingdom of Cambodia 1998, 2008 & 2019

Urbanization patterns vary significantly across the four provinces. Preah Sihanouk and Kep experienced the most notable growth in urbanization percentages, with Kep showing a dramatic rise from 13% in 2008 to 79% in 2019. In contrast, Kampot’s urbanization grew modestly, remaining largely rural. Koh Kong displayed consistent urban growth, despite fluctuations in total population. While Kampot and Kep experienced continuous population increases, Preah Sihanouk saw a slight decline in its total population by 2019, possibly due to migration or reclassification of urban areas. Koh Kong’s population decreased between 1998 and 2008 but showed a slight recovery by 2019. Factors such as development, migration, and administrative changes likely influenced these trends. Preah Sihanouk and Kep emerged as urbanization leaders, while Kampot retained its rural identity. Koh Kong exhibited steady progress, reflecting a balanced transition toward urban living.

Table 4: Economic Potentials of the four provinces

Description	Preah Sihanouk	Kampot	Koh Kong	Kep
Size	1,938 Km ²	4,873 Km ²	10,090 Km ²	336Km ²
Administration	3 municipalities & 3 districts	2 municipalities & 7 districts	1 municipality & 6 districts	1 municipality & 1 district
Tourism	32 islands, beaches (110 Km), national parks	3 islands, beaches (67 Km), waterfalls, national parks	23 islands, beaches (237 Km), national parks	13 islands, beaches (26 Km), national parks

Industry	Manufacturing, 5 special economic zones	Manufacturing, 1 special economic zone, hydropower	Manufacturing, 1 economic zone	
Infrastructure & Connectivity	Seaports, airport, train, express way, national roads, ferries	Seaports, train, national roads,	Seaport, national roads	Kep international tourist port, national roads

Source: Authors' compilation from various sources⁶⁰

Table 3 highlights the economic potential of the four Cambodia's coastal provinces. Each province has unique attributes that contribute to its economic development. Preah Sihanouk is a hub of economic activity, with a size of 1,938 km², three cities, and three districts. Its strong tourism sector includes 32 islands, 110 kilometers of beaches, and national parks, which attract domestic and international visitors. Additionally, the province is an industrial powerhouse, hosting 12 special economic zones. Infrastructure, including seaports, an airport, train services, expressways, national roads, and ferries, facilitates trade and investment, solidifying its status as a key economic zone.

Kampot, spanning 4,873 km² with two cities and seven districts, also has significant economic potential. Its tourism assets include three islands, 67 kilometers of beaches, waterfalls, and national parks. The province has a growing industrial base, with two special economic zones and hydropower projects. Kampot's infrastructure, consisting of seaports, train lines, and national roads, supports connectivity and economic activity in the region.

Koh Kong stands out for its expansive land area of 10,090 km², with one city and six districts. This province boasts 23 islands, 237 kilometers of beaches, and lush national parks, making it a vital destination for eco-tourism and nature-based tourism. On the industrial front, Koh Kong has nine economic zones and benefits from a seaport and national road networks, which bolster trade and industrial development.

Kep, the smallest province at 336 km² with one city and one district, leverages its tourism-oriented economy. It features 13 islands, 26 kilometers of beaches, and national parks. The province is home to the Kep International Tourist Port and national road connections, enhancing its

⁶⁰ There are a number of special economic zones (SEZs) in the coastal provinces, However, only operating SEZs are mentioned here. The list of operating SEZs is available at <https://cdc.gov.kh/sez-smart-search/>, last visited 25 November 2024.

accessibility and tourism-driven economic potential. Despite its small size, Kep's focus on tourism and connectivity underpins its economic significance.

3.1. Urban Planning at Preah Sihanouk Province

Based on the literature, there are 4 main documents on city planning which include (i) Sub-decree No. 81 dated 13 June 2018 on Implementation of Preah Sihanouk Provincial Land Management Plan; (ii) Land Management and Use Policy for the Development of Sihanoukville into a Multi-Purpose Special Economic Zone, 2022-2038; (iii) Decision No. 045 dated 08 September 2021 on Implementation of Master Plan for Land Use at Preah Sihanouk City, Preah Sihanouk Province, adopted by the Council of Ministers on 13 January 2023; (iv) Decision No. 88 dated 28 June 2019 on Implementation of Master Plan for Land at Koh Rong, Koh Rong City, Preah Sihanouk Province.

3.1.1 Master Plan for Land Management

Preah Sihanouk Provincial Land Management Plan was proposed by the National Committee for Land Management and Urbanization and implemented by Sub-decree No. 81 dated 13 June 2018 with a vision of 2030. The vision of the master plan for land management is to organize and develop "Preah Sihanouk Province as a pole for sustainable national development in the coastal areas of Cambodia through the development of modern cities, the most beautiful beaches in the world, special economic zones, multi-purpose model, international gateway, national development center, national logistics center with links to ASEAN and global markets and modern technology manufacturing centers that harmonize with a better living environment" based on economic potential, geographical location of Cambodia's coastal areas and national, regional and international frameworks.⁶¹

Urban development strategies include the development of master plan and land use plan for the municipals, districts and populated areas, development of islands adjacent to eco-tourism sites by maintaining existing forest cover on at least 60% of the total island area, and by setting up solid and liquid waste management systems to ensure quality and environmental sustainability.⁶² The strategies also include management, protection and planning the use of coastal reserved land as a public space and green space for the public and tourists. Moreover, the strategies are to promote the preparation of public roads along the coastal reserved land and to prepare detailed urban planning to manage and protect the landscape, beauty and environment of the coastal area of Cambodia in Preah Sihanouk Province.

There are 2 main types of land which are buildable land and land limiting contraction. The buildable land includes residential areas, business areas, industrial areas, mixed areas, tourist areas, transportation areas, administrative and public service areas, public space and green space, cultural

⁶¹ The vision was adopted according to the Rectangular Strategy-Phase 3, National Policy on Land Management of the Kingdom of Cambodia, Industrial Development Policy in Cambodia and many other key policies of the Royal Government.

⁶² Regulation on land development on the island. The land use index is 1.5. the ratio of the constructed area and land area must not more than 35%. Remaining land should be prepared for planting trees and green garden at least 50%. Maximum construction height is 3 floors (maximum height 12 meters).

and religious areas and other areas in accordance with the geographical location of the Preah Sihanouk Province. The land limited for construction include agricultural areas, forest areas, multi-use areas, freshwater river, mangrove forests, seagrass, coral and flooded forest areas, freshwater marine biodiversity, protected areas, natural resources, seas, beaches, coastal reserved areas, marine parks and islands, biodiversity conservation area, natural protection system, national defense areas.

3.1.2 Master Plan on Land Use in Preah Sihanouk Municipal

The Master Plan for Land Use in Preah Sihanouk Municipal is implemented under the Decision No. 045 of the National Committee for Land Management and Urbanization, dated 8 September. Its 2038 vision can be updated every 5 years according to the need of social and economic development.⁶³ The plan is envisioned “Preah Sihanouk Municipal to be the core city of sustainable development pole in the coastal areas of Cambodia in promoting economic growth, business development, trade and tourism with vibrancy, intelligence and environment” through the development of (i) modern, green, creative and vibrant city with the best living environment; (ii) multipurpose special economic zone, international financial center and national growth center; (iii) the most beautiful beaches and islands in the world for leisure and recreation; (iv) support center for the technological and innovative manufacturing industries; (v) international gateway and natural logistics related to ASEAN and global markets; (vi) model cities in good management and governance, with city services, urban infrastructure, urban facilities and rich jobs.

To realize the above vision, the master plan divides the strategies for development and conservation into 8 strategies. First, the master plan focuses on urban development and direction, coastal and islands conservation and development and development of the municipal to be a smart, sustainable and environmentally friendly city. Second, the master plan identifies the type of land that can be built and the type of land which limits construction. Third, the master plan defines the axis of development of logistics, tourism and trade on the national road; the axis of the development of logistics and industry on the railway connecting Preah Sihanouk Municipal and Phnom Penh Capital City; roads and public transport services; railway; waterways and ports; civil aviation; power and electricity supply; water supply and water resources; infrastructure integration. Fourth, economic development strategies cover development of tourism, industry and agriculture. Fifth, social development strategies include development of education, health, model cities for good governance with urban services, urban infrastructure, urban facilities and diverse work, public spaces, gardens and green belt areas, physical and cultural facilities and social development. Sixth, environmental protection and waste management strategies include solid waste management, liquid waste management, land use zoning for environmental protection, and necessary measures to protect key areas. Seventh, the disaster prevention strategies include measures to prevent disasters from canals and major waterways, measures to prevent blockages of waterways, measures to prevent blockages of streams by new developments, measures to prevent disasters on slopes and

⁶³ National Committee for Land Management and Urbanization, Implementation of Master Plan on Land Use at Preah Sihanouk Municipal, Decision No. 045, clause 3 (2021).

preventive measures against coastal disasters. Eighth, the plan set the strategy to strengthen good governance, local administration and finance management.

New urban development area: The government has determined the development of a new metropolitan area by expanding into the sea area of the Ream coastal area. Physical infrastructure development area must be limited to at least 25% of the new urban development area, including (i) public road network: bicycle lane, pedestrian road, disabled road, tree planting and green network, equipped with street lighting, traffic lights, traffic signs in accordance with the regulations in force; (ii) public facilities include clean water system, sewer system, sewer system, rainwater system, electricity network, telecommunication network in accordance with the regulations in force; (iii) solid and liquid waste management systems, including landfills, waste processing plants, sewer systems, wastewater treatment plants in accordance with applicable regulations; and (iv) fire and risk management systems in accordance with applicable regulations.

Development of public space and green space is limited to at least 10% of the new urban development area or 10 square meters per person, including public parks, playgrounds, gyms, sports fields and playgrounds. The construction area for providing services to the public must be determined according to the needs of each development project, such as schools, health centers, administrative buildings, markets to ensure the efficient and equitable provision of public services. Green development, adaptation and climate change mitigation plans must clearly identify potential fire hazards to ensure safety, security and public welfare, protect the environment and promote cultural values and national identity.

The area of the new urban development area remaining from the above development is defined as a development area with low land use index, development area with medium land use index and development area with high land use index. Development in this area must comply with the rules on (i) the ratio of floor area to plot area (ii) land use index (iii) building height (iv) building space (v) aesthetics and color (vi) Khmer and natural architecture (vii) toilets and wastewater treatment plants in accordance with technical regulations (viii), tree planting and (ix) parking. Land limiting construction is divided into (i) agricultural areas, (ii) forest areas, (iii) water resources areas, (iv) coastal protected areas, and (v) Kbal Chhay freshwater diversified areas.

3.1.3 Master Plan on Land Use in Koh Rong Municipal

Koh Rong is an archipelago city established by Sub-decree No. 02 dated 08 January 2019, covering an area of 11,323.89 hectares, with 2 communes: Koh Rong (3 villages) and Koh Rong Samloem (2 villages).⁶⁴ The city is 25 km from Sihanoukville Autonomous Port and 17 km from Botum Sakor District, Koh Kong Province. Koh Rong Land Use Master Plan of Koh Rong City, Preah Sihanouk Province was adopted by Resolution No. 088 dated 30 December 2022 of the National Committee for Land Management and Urbanization. This master plan has a vision until 2038.

⁶⁴ Royal Government of Cambodia, Sub-Decree on Establishment of Koh Rong Municipal, Preah Sihanouk Province, No. 02 (2019).

Preah Sihanouk Provincial Committee for Land Management and Urbanization and Koh Rong Municipal Committee for Land Management and Urbanization have mandate to prepare a plan for the effective implementation of this land use master plan and report the progress to the National Committee for Land Management and Urbanization and the MLMUC.⁶⁵ Koh Rong Municipal Committee for Land Management and Urbanization must update Koh Rong Land Use Master Plan every 5 years as necessary for economic and social development. Early revision of can be done if there is a need to serve the public interest or the national interest. This revision must be carried out according to the procedures set out in Resolution No. 041, dated 22 July 2014 on the detailed procedures for the preparation of land use master plan and land use plan at the municipal, district and khan level.⁶⁶

The detail master plan of Koh Rong Municipal is being developed. Pursuant to Resolution No. 089 of the National Committee for Coastal Management and Development of Cambodia dated October 20, 2023, it was decided to establish a working group to update the master plan for Koh Rong land use in Koh Rong Municipal, Preah Sihanouk Province.

3.2. Urban Planning at Kampot Province

Kampot Provincial administration is divided into 2 municipalities, 7 districts, 85 communes and 8 Sangkat. Accordingly, physical urban plan for Kampot Province will be composed of Kampot provincial plan on land management, master plan on land use of 2 municipalities and of 7 districts, plans on land use at 85 communes and 8 Sangkat; and plan on detailed urbanization at each urban area. Based on the literature regarding urbanization in Kampot Province, the provincial plan on land management, master plan on land use at 6 districts and plan on land use at 26 communes and 3 Sangkat are not found. The Master Plan on Land Use of the Kampot Municipal and of Bokor Municipal in Kampot Province, were issued by the National Committee of Land Management and Urbanization in 2018 and 2019 respectively.⁶⁷

3.2.1. Master Plan for Land Use in Kampot Municipal

The Master Plan for Land Use in Kampot Municipal is implemented under the Decision of the National Committee for Land Management and Urbanization No. 003 dated 05 July 2018. This master plan has a vision for 2030 and can be revised by the Municipal Committee for Land Management and Urbanization within 5 years. Kampot Provincial Committee for Land Management and Urbanization and Kampot Municipal Committee for Land Management and Urbanization are responsible to adopt the implementation plan of this master plan and report of

⁶⁵ National Land Management and Urban Planning Committee, Implementation of Master Plan on Land Use in Koh Rong Municipal, Resolution No. 088, clause 2 (2022).

⁶⁶ *Id.* clause 3.

⁶⁷ National Committee of Land Management and Urbanization, Implementation of Master Plan for Land Use in Kampot Municipality for the vision of 2030, Decision No. 003 (2018); and Royal Government of Cambodia, Implementation of Master Plan for Land Development Project at Bokor Municipality for the vision 2030, Sub-degree No. 88 (2019).

implementation to the National Committee of Land Management and Urbanization and the MLMUC.⁶⁸

The master plan has a vision to organize and develop Kampot municipal to be a green pearl city, natural beach, culture and trade through urban development to becoming (i) the most beautiful pearl resort, beach, nature and culture in the world; (ii) agricultural and industrial processing center; (iii) international market for agricultural products and distribution; (iv) a modern city with good infrastructure, urban services and quality of living environment; and (v) good management and governance. The master plan sets out a number of development and conservation strategies for Kampot municipal including (i) management, conservation, development, land use and urbanization in an effective, balance and sustainable manner; (ii) development of tourism sector strategies; (iii) development strategies for infrastructures, technologies and services (iv) development strategies for agricultural sector and advertisement of domestic products; (v) strategies in social development; (vi) strategies in protection of environment and natural resources; (vii) disaster prevention strategies; and (viii) strategies to strengthen local management and finance.

The area under the Master Plan in Kampot Municipal has a total land area of 6,027 hectares, consists of two types of land uses including buildable land and land restricting the construction. Land restricting the construction is divided into 4 areas, such as agricultural area, plantations and livestock farms, the salt field and mangrove forest area, the forest area, and water resource area. Buildable land is divided into (i) residential area, (ii) construction sites of historical and cultural heritage area, (iii) commercial area, (iv) mixed area, (v) transport area, (vi) tourist area, (vii) administrative and public services area, (viii) public and green area, (ix) cultural and religious area, (x) and technical infrastructure area. Construction regulations in each area include consideration on proportion to the floor area compared to the land area, garden area, tree planting, parking space, toilet height, wastewater treatment plant, wastewater treatment, building color, aesthetics and Khmer architectural style and/or nature.

3.2.2. Master Plan for Land Use in Bokor Municipal

The Master Plan for Land Use in Bokor Municipal is implemented under the Sub-degree No. 88 dated 28 June 2019. This master plan has a vision for 2035 and can be revised according to the need of social and economic development. The amendment to this master plan is allowed before the due date if it is based on the public interest or national interest.⁶⁹ The master plan composes of 8 sections, including the (i) introduction, (ii) visions, (iii) purposes and targets, (iv) strategies for development and conservation of the development project at Bokor Municipal, (v) actions plan, (vi) financial resources, (vii) monitoring and evaluation, and (viii) conclusion.

The master plan has a vision to design and develop “Bokor Mountain to be a smart city, tourism, history, green, natural and unique mountain-sea climate city of the Kingdom of Cambodia” by (i)

⁶⁸ National Committee for Land Management and Urbanization, Implementation of Master Plan for Land Use in Kep Municipality of Kep Province 2030, Decision No. 001, Clause 2 (2018).

⁶⁹ Royal Government of Cambodia, Sub-Decree on Implementation of Master Plan for Land Development Project at Bokor Municipal, No. 88, clause 2 (2019).

adopting policies and legal norms in order to establish the city for leisure, recreation, study, work and business with healthy and good quality environment and high-end luxury tourism destination for regional and international attraction and competition; (ii) promoting the nature conservation of natural water resources, landscape and mountain-sea climate; (iii) constructing public infrastructure, buildings which provide services to the public, public space and integrated infrastructure in the region; (iv) attracting incentive and supporting public and private investment to develop business, developing rich, high-quality tourism products and promote economic growth; and (v) promoting good governance and human resource development. Strategies for development and conservation of the Bokor Development Project include effective and sustainable land use and urban management strategy, the development of tourism, technical and service infrastructure, social development strategy, natural resource management strategy and green development, strategy for disaster prevention and expansion of management and finance at the local level.

Bokor Development Project is defined as two types of land use, such as buildable land type and land restricting construction. Monivong National Park has a total area of 154,458 hectares. In which, the share of the construct area is 18.09% of the total park area while that of the land restricting construction is 81.91% of the total park area. The land of 18,987 hectares of land was subdivided and handed over to Sokha Hotel in accordance with Sub-Decree No. 59, dated March 30, 2011 on the Designation of Protected Areas in Protected Areas as Sustainable Use Areas.

Regarding land restricting construction, the State Land's Sustainable Use Area of Monivong "Bokor" National Park has the following types of land which restrict construction. Firstly, the protected area of Monivong National Park covers an area of 81,257 hectares, equivalent to 52.61% of the remaining land area of Monivong Bokor Park, after being leased to Sokha Hotel and prepared for the development of Bokor City. This area is used as a historical city, mountains, water resources, forests, roads and agricultural areas. Secondly, water resources area includes streams, canals, rivers, reservoirs, covers an area of 1,094 hectares, equivalent to 0.71% of the area of Monivong Park (excluding the water resources of Sokha Hotel). Thirdly, the agricultural area consists of agricultural land as a zoo with an area of about 160 hectares, equivalent to 1.10% of the area of Monivong Park. This area is maintained as agricultural land with plan to manage agricultural land by clearly defining and dividing agricultural potential areas and implementation of urban expansion plans using modern techniques to minimize the allocated agricultural land and expand agricultural land along the slope. Fourthly, Sokha Hotel's land area is about 18,987 hectares, equivalent to 12.29% of the area of Monivong Park. This location was developed by Sokha Hotel to form a tourist center, accommodation and other infrastructure.

Type of land that can be built. The Bokor Development Project is divided into 8 locations, each of which is defined as a land use area, and each area has its own land use regulations. Based on the land use map of Bokor City Development Vision 2035, the types of land that can be built are divided into 9 main areas, including (i) residential areas, (ii) commercial areas, (iii) mixed areas, (iv) transport areas, (v) tourist areas, (vi) administrative areas and public services, (vii) public spaces and areas; (viii) green, cultural and religious areas and (ix) technical infrastructure areas. Construction regulations in each area must be compared to the area of the basement compared to the area of the waterproof garden plot, tree planting, alignment, yard space, height, parking lot,

toilet, wastewater treatment plant, building color, aesthetics and has a Khmer architectural style and natural correctness.

3.3. Urban Planning at Koh Kong Province

3.3.1. Urban Physical Plans

Koh Kong Province is divided into 1 municipal, 6 districts, 26 communes and 3 Sangkat. Hence, physical urban plan for Koh Kong Province should consist of Koh Kong provincial plan on land management, master plan on land use of 1 municipal and of 6 districts, plans on land use at 26 communes and 3 Sangkat. Based on the literature, the provincial plan on land management, master plan on land use at 6 districts and plan on land use at 26 communes and 3 Sangkat are not found. It is found that only Master Plan on Land Use of the Khemarak Phoumin Municipality in Koh Kong Province was issued by the National Committee of Land Management and Urbanization in 2019.⁷⁰

This master plan has a vision for 2030 and can be revised by the Municipal Committee for Land Management and Urbanization within 5 years. Koh Kong Provincial Committee and Khemarak Phoumin Municipal Committee for Land Management and Urbanization are responsible to adopt the implementation plan of this master plan and report of implementation to the National Committee of Land Management and Urbanization and the MLMUC.⁷¹

The Master Plan sets out a number of development and conservation strategies for the municipal, including (i) management, conservation, development, land use and urbanization in an effective, balance and sustainable manner; (ii) development strategies for sustainable and smart city; (iii) development of tourism sector strategies; (iv) development strategies for commerce, business and services; (v) development strategies for infrastructures, technologies and public services; (vi) agriculture and procession industry strategies; (vii) strategies in social development; (viii) strategies in protection of environment and natural resources; (ix) disaster Prevention Strategies; and (x) strategies to strengthen local management and finance. Koh Kong provincial administration, Khemarak Phoumin municipal administration and relevant authorities must implement the actions plans according to the National Policy on Land Management of Cambodia and the Master Plan on Land Use of Khemark Phoumin Municipal.

Khemarak Phoumin Municipal has a total land area of 10,047 hectares, divided into two types of land uses: buildable land with the size of 2,316.47 hectares, equivalent to 23.05% of the city land size, and land restricting the construction with the size of 7,730.53 hectares, equivalent to 76.95% of the total municipal land size. Buildable land type is divided into 10 areas. Construction regulations in each area must be comparable to the floor area compared to the land plot area, waterproof garden, tree planting, row alignment, yard height, parking lot, toilet, sewage treatment plant, building color, aesthetics, Khmer architectural style and natural correctness.

⁷⁰ National Committee of Land Management and Urbanization, Implementation of Master Plan on Land Use in Khemarak Phoumin Municipality of Koh Kong Province for the vision of 2030, Decision No. 076, (2019).

⁷¹ *Id.* clause 2.

3.4. Urban Planning at Kep Province

3.4.1 Urban Physical Plans

Kep Province, the smallest province in Cambodia, is administratively divided into 1 municipal, 1 district, 2 communes and 3 Sangkat. There should be a plan on land management at the provincial level, master plans on land use for 1 municipal and 1 district, plan on land use for 2 communes and 3 Sangkat, and plan on detailed urbanization. Among these physical plans, only Master Plan for Land Use in Kep Municipal was issued by the National Committee for Land Management and Urbanization in 2018.⁷²

3.4.2. Development Plans

Tourism Master Plan for Kep Province 2023-2035 approved by the Royal Government of Cambodia on 14 July 2023 in consideration to the fact that Kep Province is located on the coast with favorable conditions and natural potential for tourism development, especially eco-tourism and cultural tourism.

The Master Plan sets out 3 main strategies in order to realize the vision of turning Kep into a “high-end eco-tourism destination and resort.”⁷³ The first strategy is Kep Tourism Pole Development Strategy which aims to turn Kep into one of the main tourism poles through the development of 4 main tourism poles including (i) the development of tourism in the old Kep area into a natural city in a world-class luxury park; (ii) the development of Angkor tourism pole into a modern natural beach tourism area; (iii) the development of Phnom Vole ecotourism into agro-tourism and historical eco-tourism; and (iv) the development of marine and archipelago tourism poles into luxury islands. The second strategy is to promote investment, and promotion aims to attract investment and participation from the private sector in the development of tourism in Kep, as well as set up a promotion mechanism to enhance the reputation of Kep as a world-class quality tourism destination. The third strategy is to develop sectors that support the development of tourism in Kep province and to find solutions to challenges in those areas, including solid and liquid waste management and the construction of key support infrastructure.

3.5. Challenges in city planning in the coastal provinces

Based on the review of city planning documents and the consultative meetings, it is observed that while there are master plans on land use for the municipalities in the 4 coastal provinces, the master plans for district and the plans on land use for districts, and Sangkat/commune are being developed. In Preah Sihanouk Province, it is important to note that since the Kompong Som Municipal was just recently established, the master plan for this new city has not been adopted. In Kampot Province, there are currently land use master plan for the city levels (Kampot municipality and Bokor municipality) and the city plans for below administrations in province are in development. Under

⁷² National Committee for Land Management and Urbanization, Implementation of Master Plan for Land Use in Kep Municipality of Kep Province 2030, Decision No. 001 (2018).

⁷³ Royal Government of Cambodia, Tourism Master Plan for Kep Province 2023-2035, p. v-vi (2023).

the support the MLMUC, along with support from the ADB bank, city plans for certain districts, such as Kampong Trach District and Chhouk District are also in progress. Similar to Kampot Province, Kep Province has had a land use master plan for the city level since 2017. However, no city plans exist for the district, Sangkat/commune levels. Pursuant to the consultative meetings with officials at Kampot province and Kep province, there are a number of reasons which delay the adoption of city planning for the entire provinces.

3.5.1. Lack of Capacity

One of the most critical challenges in advancing city planning in these provinces is the limited availability of skilled personnel. Urban planning requires expertise in various disciplines, including land management, architecture, and environmental sustainability. Consultative meetings with officials in Kampot and Kep provinces revealed that the provinces often rely heavily on support from the Ministry of Land Management, Urbanization, and Construction as well as international partners like the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Without sufficient in-house expertise, provincial administrations struggle to meet the technical demands of developing and implementing comprehensive master plans.

Provincial and district officials often lack the necessary training to effectively engage in land-use planning. This knowledge gap hinders the creation of localized plans that address the unique socio-economic and environmental contexts of districts and communes. For instance, despite Kampot Province having a master plan at the city level for Kampot and Bokor municipalities, progress at the district level—such as in Kampong Trach and Chhouk—is in the progress due to these capacity constraints. Similarly, Kep Province, despite its master plan since 2017, has yet to develop district or commune-level plans.

3.5.2. Lack of Financing

Urban planning is a resource-intensive process requiring substantial financial investments for data collection, analysis, stakeholder engagement, and plan formulation. Provinces like Preah Sihanouk and Kampot face significant budget constraints, particularly at the district and commune levels. For example, while ADB's support has facilitated progress in some areas, such as Kampong Trach and Chhouk districts, reliance on external funding underscores the inadequacy of provincial budgets. In addition, international organizations like ADB play a vital role in supporting urban planning in Cambodia, but this dependence creates challenges. External funding often comes with specific conditions and timelines, which may not align with the provinces' unique needs or capacities. Moreover, donor-driven projects sometimes prioritize high-visibility outcomes, potentially sidelining the holistic development of smaller or less prominent areas. Last, local governments in Cambodia have limited revenue-generation mechanisms. Municipalities and provinces often depend on transfers from the central government, which may not be sufficient to address their planning needs. This funding gap affects not only the preparation of master plans but also their implementation and monitoring.

3.5.3. Lack of Coordination

Effective urban planning requires seamless coordination among various government entities. In Cambodia, this involves the MLMUC, provincial governments, district administrations, and commune councils. However, a lack of clear communication channels and overlapping responsibilities often result in delays. For example, in Preah Sihanouk Province, the recent establishment of Kompong Som Municipality has introduced additional layers of administrative complexity, further complicating coordination efforts.

Public participation is a cornerstone of sustainable urban planning, yet it remains a significant challenge in Cambodia's coastal provinces. Low rates of resident involvement in planning processes hinder the creation of inclusive and community-driven plans. Consultative meetings with officials highlighted that many residents are either unaware of planning activities or lack trust in the process. This disconnect reduces the effectiveness of plans and can lead to conflicts during implementation.

The absence of integrated planning frameworks across different administrative levels—municipal, district, and commune—is another major challenge. While municipalities like Kampot and Bokor have master plans, these do not always align with district or commune-level planning efforts. Such misalignment can result in inconsistencies, with potential negative impacts on land use, infrastructure development, and environmental management.

4. Case Studies of Urban Planning in Singapore and Japan and Lessons Learned

Box 2: Urban Planning in Singapore

Singapore's urban planning framework provides a valuable model for addressing the challenges of urbanization in Cambodia's coastal provinces, including Preah Sihanouk, Kampot, Kep, and Koh Kong. Singapore, despite its limited land area of approximately 700 square kilometers and a population nearing six million, has successfully implemented sustainable urban planning strategies under the governance of the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). These strategies emphasize efficient land use, long-term planning, public participation, resilient infrastructure, and centralized governance. By adapting these approaches, Cambodia can address its pressing urbanization challenges while ensuring sustainable development in its vulnerable coastal regions.

A critical lesson from Singapore is its strategic land-use management, which balances high-density development with ecological preservation through effective zoning policies. Considering ecological value in Cambodia where natural resources are abundant and potential for tourism development, Cambodia can tailor and improve effectiveness of its existing mechanism of restricted buildable area under Sub-decree No. 42 adopted in 2015 on Urbanization of Capital, City and Urban Area for ecological preservation. Singapore's integrated planning process, combining a 50-year Concept Plan with short- and medium-term Master Plans reviewed every five years, offers another vital takeaway. Cambodia's coastal provinces can benefit from a 20–30-year urbanization vision aligned with national strategies,

supported by regularly updated master plans to accommodate dynamic socio-economic and environmental needs.

Public engagement is a cornerstone of Singapore's urban planning. Community involvement in the planning process ensures that developments address local needs and gain public trust. Cambodia can enhance public participation by organizing workshops, accessible displays of proposed plans, and mechanisms for community feedback. Furthermore, Singapore's focus on climate-resilient infrastructure, including flood defenses and sustainable waste management, provides a blueprint for Cambodia to address its climate vulnerabilities in coastal areas. Finally, Singapore's centralized yet holistic governance, where the URA oversees urbanization while coordinating with other agencies such as HDB, National Parks Board, and LTA, could inspire Cambodia to strengthen collaboration of its Ministry of Land Management, Urbanization and Construction with other concerning ministries while empowering provincial administrations to implement context-specific strategies.

While inspired by Singapore's strategies, Cambodia must consider its local constraints, such as limited technical expertise and financial resources. A phased approach, beginning with pilot projects in key provinces/urban areas, can demonstrate the viability of these strategies while fostering capacity building. By prioritizing sustainable practices, community engagement, and climate resilience, Cambodia's coastal provinces can achieve balanced urbanization that supports economic growth while preserving environmental integrity and cultural heritage. While the new draft of Sub decree 42 is under reviewing and public consultation, it provides a good timing to examine its mechanisms to address the needs in urban planning processes in Cambodia.

Box 3: Urban Planning in Japan

Japan's urban planning framework, governed by the City Planning Act of 1968, provides a model of sustainable and orderly urban development. The Act focuses on promoting sound growth while balancing economic development, public welfare, and environmental conservation. Central to Japan's approach is the designation of city planning and quasi-city planning areas, which regulate land use and prevent unregulated urban sprawl. Detailed zoning within these areas defines land for residential, commercial, industrial, and green space use, with strict regulations on building height, aesthetics, and environmental conservation. Disaster resilience is a core feature, with zoning for disaster prevention, fire safety, and recovery zones integrated into city plans. Japan's urban planning policies also emphasize stakeholder participation, requiring public hearings and consultations to incorporate community input, ensuring transparency and inclusivity.

Governance in Japan operates at two levels—national and local—with 47 prefectures and over 1,700 municipalities collaborating to implement city plans tailored to local needs. This multi-level governance ensures cohesive urban development aligned with national goals while addressing regional challenges. The framework also emphasizes proactive measures, such as

classifying urbanization promotion and control areas to guide sustainable growth and integrating green space conservation and disaster preparedness to safeguard public welfare and the environment. Public participation is institutionalized through mandated public hearings and information dissemination, fostering community engagement in urban planning decisions.

For Cambodia's coastal provinces, Japan's framework offers valuable lessons. Integrated planning and zoning can balance rapid urbanization with environmental preservation, while governance structures can delineate responsibilities to streamline decision-making. Public engagement, a cornerstone of Japan's system, can improve transparency and ensure that local communities are active participants in shaping development plans. Finally, disaster resilience strategies, such as zoning and infrastructure planning, can mitigate climate risks in Cambodia's vulnerable coastal regions. By adapting these principles, Cambodia can build urban environments that are inclusive, sustainable, and resilient to future challenges.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The study identifies several challenges in Cambodia's city planning and urbanization efforts, including capacity constraints, inadequate funding, poor coordination, limited public participation, and insufficient disaster resilience measures. These issues hinder sustainable urban development in the coastal provinces. Drawing lessons from Cambodia, Singapore, and Japan, this study emphasizes the importance of integrated, inclusive, and resilient urban planning. To address these challenges, the following recommendations are provided, categorized by stakeholders: government, private sector, civil society, and community, with timelines for short-, medium-, and long-term action.

Government: In the short term, the government should prioritize capacity building for sub-national administrators through workshops, exchange programs, and scholarships. Immediate efforts should also focus on improving policy access and transparency by publishing urban planning guidelines online and facilitating public consultations. In the medium term, the government should revise land management laws to reflect modern urbanization needs, establish mechanisms for local revenue generation such as property taxes, and integrate technological tools like Geographic Information Systems (GIS) for better land-use planning. Long-term strategies should include developing and revising comprehensive master plans for municipalities and communes every five years, establishing provincial urban planning authorities to oversee regional efforts, and institutionalizing climate adaptation measures, such as afforestation and coastal protection.

Private Sector: In the short term, the private sector should engage in public-private partnerships to co-fund small-scale urban pilot projects, such as green spaces in Kep and Preah Sihanouk provinces. Over the medium term, private entities should invest in critical infrastructure like waste management systems and public transportation networks while adhering to green building standards. For the long term, the private sector should focus on transforming Preah Sihanouk into

a multipurpose economic hub and developing eco-tourism infrastructure in Kep, promoting sustainable practices in both economic zones.

Civil Society: Civil society should focus on raising public awareness about the importance of urban planning through workshops and social media campaigns in the short term. It can play a vital role in advocating for transparency and inclusivity in urban planning processes. Medium-term initiatives should include training programs for local administrators and monitoring the implementation of urban plans to ensure accountability. Over the long term, civil society organizations can advocate for public participation as a legal requirement and support large-scale environmental projects such as reforestation and wetland conservation to promote sustainability.

Community: Communities should engage actively in urban planning by participating in workshops, consultations, and local initiatives such as waste reduction and beautification projects. In the medium term, community members can collaborate with municipal authorities on co-managing infrastructure projects and develop local leadership through training programs. Long-term involvement should focus on resilience-building activities, including disaster preparedness and participation in climate adaptation measures. Empowering community groups to oversee urban development and monitor local government initiatives will ensure sustained engagement and accountability.

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Towards Sustainable Utilisation of Lake Tonle Sap as a Central Component of Nature and Culture in Cambodia - on the Basis of the Results of the Scientific Research Programmes -

*Dr. Shinji TSUKAWAKI **

Executive Summary

Lake Tonle Sap, the largest lake in Southeast Asia, is a central component of the natural environment in Cambodia due to its unique hydrological setting and rich freshwater biodiversity (Fig. 1). The lake is also well known as “the heart of Cambodia” in reference to its close association with the lives and culture of the Cambodian people since prehistoric times. Its ecological importance is also reflected in its status as one

Fig. 1 Location and seasonal changes of Lake Tonle Sap.

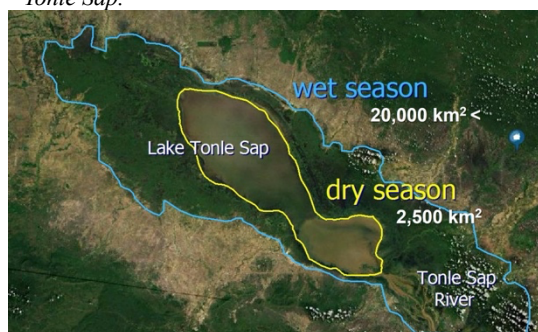
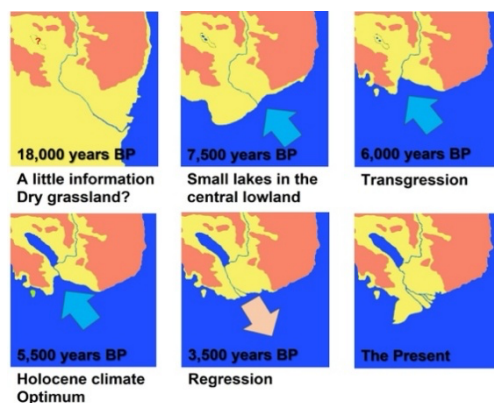


Fig. 2 Geo-environmental history of Lake Tonle Sap over the last 18,000 years.



of UNESCO's Biosphere Reserves.

As a result of two research programmes entitled “Tonle Sap 96” conducted in 1996 and “Tonle Sap 21” conducted in 2000 – 2002, researchers were able to publicise a detailed geo-environmental history of the lake over the last 20,000 years. The findings confirmed that the area was originally made up of a collection of small lakes in the central lowlands of Cambodia about 7,500 years ago. The present-day large lake was created as a result of a geological event that connected the lake

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with the Mekong River around 5,500 years ago during the warm Holocene Climate Optimum period (Fig. 2). In addition to these important findings, the research programmes concluded that the lake's present environment will remain durable into the future due to the absence of actual sediment accumulation on the floor of the lake (Fig. 3).

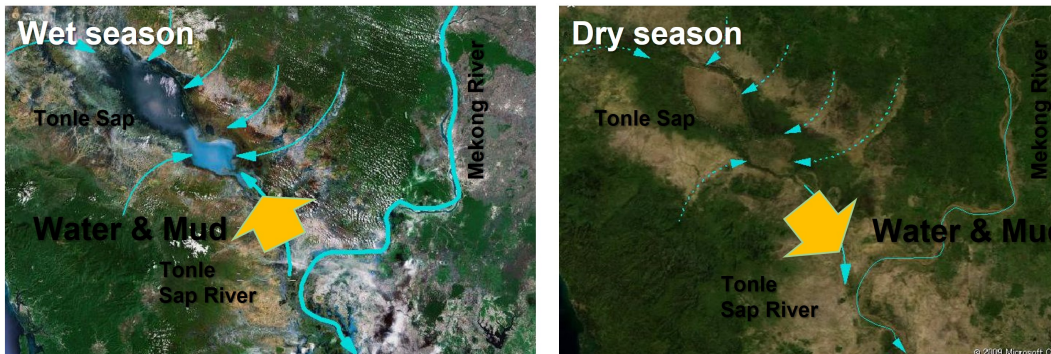


Fig. 3 A huge amount of mud flows into the lake from the Mekong River during wet seasons, but the mud flows out from the lake due to back current of the Tonle Sap River at dry seasons. The research programmes concluded that the lake's present environment will remain durable into the future due to the absence of actual sediment accumulation on the floor of the lake.

On the basis of the results of these programmes, the EMSB Programme (Evaluation of Mechanisms Sustaining the Biodiversity of Lake Tonle Sap) since 2003 was initiated in order to determine the mechanisms that sustain the freshwater biodiversity of the lake (Fig. 4). To date, the programme has successfully detailed the geological, hydrological, zoological and botanical features of the lake. The research has also revealed that the lake's rich and unique biodiversity has been sustained by its present accommodating environment and by the seasonally inundated forests that surround the lake (Figs. 5 and 6).

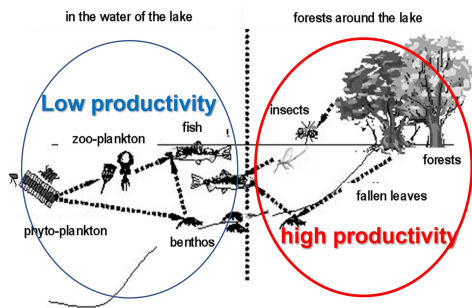


Fig. 5. The research has also revealed that the lake's rich and unique biodiversity has been sustained by its present accommodating environment and by the seasonally inundated forests that surround the lake.

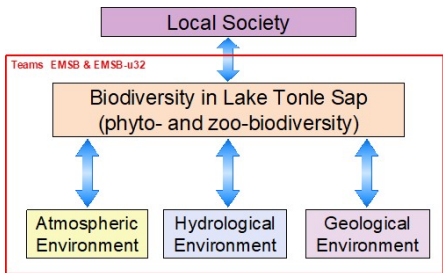


Fig. 4 Components of the Teams EMSB and EMSB-u32, Evaluation of Mechanisms Sustaining the Biodiversity of Lake Tonle Sap.

The programme's findings highlight the importance of conserving the lake's present-day unique condition and of promoting environmentally sustainable practices in terms of how the lake is used and protected.

One major challenge to the protection and sustainable use of Lake Tonle Sap is the fact that Cambodia's Angkor World Heritage Site is located close by to its north. This site possesses a rich cultural heritage but also is a vast complex of cultural, environmental, and social and economic significance to the area. As a result of an explosion in largely unplanned tourism in and around Angkor in the last twenty years, environmental pollution and degradation have become much more pressing problems. For example, whereas only a few thousand tourists visited the World Heritage Site in 1992, the number of yearly visitors had risen to at least 4 million by 2014. The changes associated with this dramatic rise in tourist numbers has resulted in, amongst other things, air pollution that has affected the conservation of temples at Angkor, the health of local people, and the delicate biodiversity of the area including Lake Tonle Sap. These problems have now reached



Fig. 6. The research has also revealed that the lake's rich and unique biodiversity has been sustained by its present accommodating environment and by the seasonally inundated forests that surround the lake.

Impact of COVID-19 on Nature and Social Issues in Cambodia

Dr. PHIM Runsinarith, Ms. LY Sokunthy⁺, Ms. NENG Sokhom^X & Mr. IM Vongrathapong[°]*

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis and the slowdown in the global economy checked Cambodia's growth performance in 2020 and growth prospects in the medium term, posing the greatest threats to development in the country's 30 years of modern history. GDP growth, projected between 5.8 percent to 7 percent pre-COVID-19, was downwardly adjusted to between -1 percent to -5.6 percent in 2020 (Figure 1). The spillovers are felt largely through three key channels: tourism, exports and FDI. Cambodia has been heavily reliant on tourists from East Asia and the Pacific, especially Chinese tourists, who account for 35 percent of total international arrivals. These suffered a rapid decline after the COVID-19 outbreak in China.

The pandemic is causing a collapse of global trade with significant negative direct and indirect impacts on Cambodia. In the United States and Europe, demand has evaporated for Cambodia's key exported products such as garments, footwear, travel goods and rice, which comprise about 52 percent of total merchandise exports. Imports of intermediate goods (raw materials for the garment, footwear and travel goods industries) have experienced supply chain disruptions. Job losses have resulted, including for more than 150,000 garment, footwear and travel goods factory workers, over 90,000 migrant workers who returned from Thailand, more than 17,000 tourism-sector workers, and an unknown but significant number of informal sector entertainment workers.

Note: This Paper was presented at a Symposium at Kanazawa University, January 2023

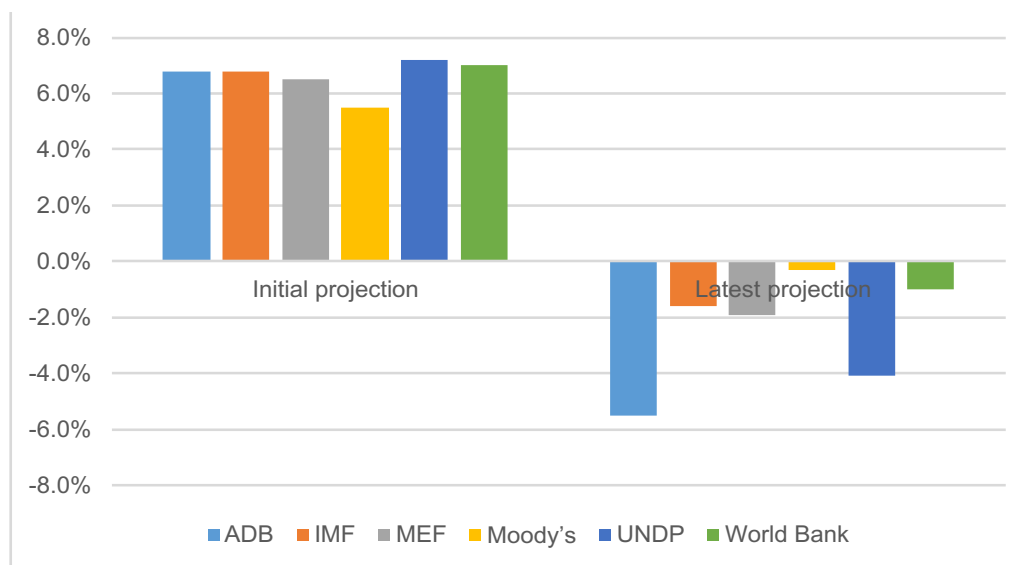
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Figure 1: GDP Growth Projection Before and After COVID-19



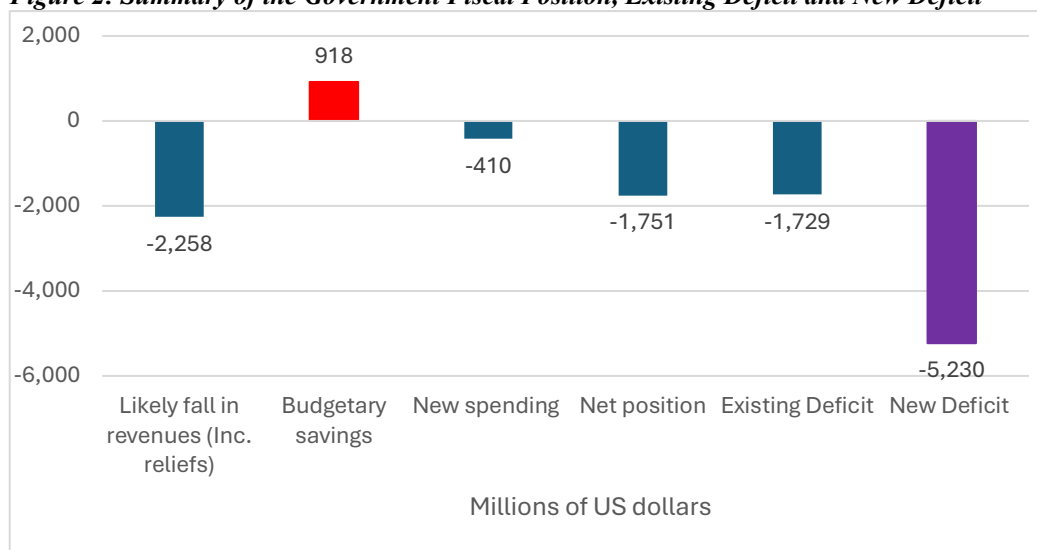
Source: United Nations 2020.

COVID-19 has consequences for macro stability. Inflation is expected to decline with falling aggregate demand, but its direction is complicated by supply restrictions at land borders. The balance of payments position, given demand shocks, and the deficit, given falling economic activity, are likely to worsen, the latter considerably so.

The Government has deployed fiscal stimulus to support the economy and protect vulnerable groups. Based on initial MEF data, this involves additional spending, largely on social protection and employment support, of around 1.6 percent of GDP, and tax cuts and relief targeted at businesses of 0.7 percent of GDP. The primary social protection intervention is a cash transfer programme covering all identified poor and near poor households, with additions for life-cycle characteristics (elderly and disabled children). This amounts to a substantial \$300 million per year.

Yet with serious deterioration in the fiscal position due to the pandemic, the Government has been forced to match new spending with cuts in discretionary (mainly capital) spending of 3.5 percent of GDP, based on provisional MEF data. The net fiscal change is –1.2 percent of GDP against the planning numbers in the 2020 budget law. As illustrated in Figure 2, the deficit is still set to rise, including an overall stimulus. This is illustrated by net additions and leakages to the economy relative to the budget’s macroeconomic framework. Data are from June 2020, however, and are subject to change as the fiscal position continues to evolve.

Figure 2: Summary of the Government Fiscal Position, Existing Deficit and New Deficit



Source: United Nations 2020

The Government has taken measures to protect the banking system by easing bank and microfinance institution reserve requirements and relaxing the few monetary policy measures available to the National Bank of Cambodia (NBC). The NBC has strengthened liquidity buffers.

A slowdown in China and an overextended financial sector poses further downside risks to Cambodia's growth prospects given its heavy reliance on capital inflows from China. There are impacts on a variety of other flows ranging from remittances to ODA loans. The Government's fiscal position is anticipated to come under further pressure.

2. Impact of COVID-19 on nature

The forest and fisheries resources play critical roles for the livelihoods of Cambodian people as well as providing invaluable ecosystem services. It is estimated that about four million people live within five kilometers of a forest, and that about of 84 percent of the rural households rely on fuel wood and charcoal. Forest resources – in particular, non-timber forest products – have provided important safety nets for rural people in times of crisis (RGC, 2017). Fish is an important diet staple for Cambodian people and second most consumed food after rice. It accounts for 37 percent of the total protein intake and 76 percent of households' animal protein intake (Vilain et al., 2016). It plays an essential role in poverty reduction, providing jobs and multiple livelihoods opportunities to six million people (Kim, 2010).

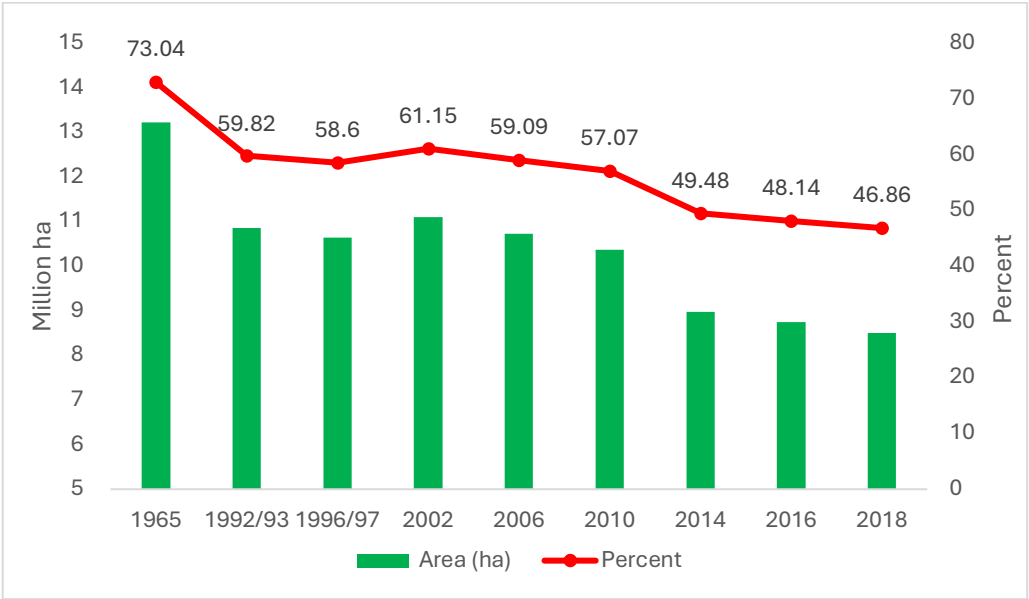
The forest and fisheries resources are however under increasing pressure from human and natural causes. These include forest clearing for private ownership and agricultural expansion, encroachment of flooded forest and fishing domains, offences related to forest, wildlife and fisheries, hydropower dams, and climate change.

2.1 Impact on Live on Land

Forest cover has declined from 61.15 percent in 2002 to 46.86 percent in 2018, with a total forest loss of 2.59 million ha (egraded (Renard et al., 2020).

Figure). Between 2006-2018, the total losses were 0.91 million ha for evergreen forest, 0.41 million ha for semi-evergreen forest, and 1.4 million ha for deciduous forest, representing 24.5 percent, 28.5 percent, 30.5 percent of its total tree cover loss, respectively (MoE, 2020). Much of the remaining forest cover is heavily degraded (Renard et al., 2020).

Figure 3: Trend in forest cover 1965-2018



Source: Ministry of Environment, 2020, and TWG Forestry & Environment, 2007

The loss of forest cover and forest degradation result in substantial loss of ecosystem services, biodiversity, soil erosion, flooding, and siltation of streams. The flash floods have occurred frequently in the recent years presumably due to the loss of forest cover. It has created serious soil erosion and increase in the siltation of the river and reservoirs such as the Tonle Sap Lake. Some natural streams have slowly disappeared and these led to reduction in wetland habitat as many of the deep water pools which are important for aquatic animals have now been filled with sediments (MoE, 2009).

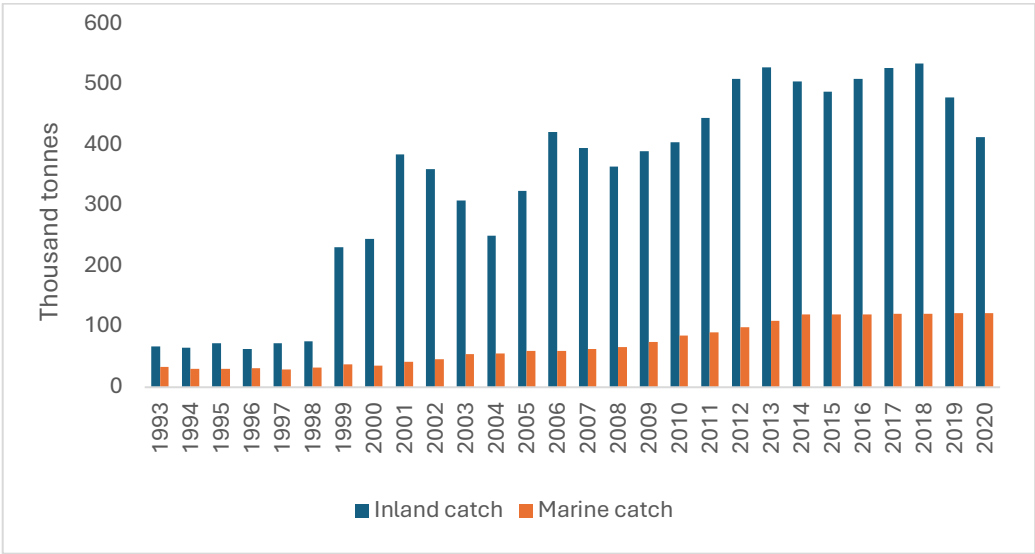
2.2 Impact on Live under Water

Cambodia is home to 775 freshwater species, 582 marine species and 26 species found in both environments (GSNCSD, 2016). The inland fisheries resources are increasingly under threats. The catches of medium and large-sized fish species have been observed to decline, and there has been an increasing trend in catches of small-sized species compensating for declines in larger species

(Ngor et al., 2018). The Cambodia Inter-Censal Agricultural Survey (CIAS) in 2019 showed that 63 percent of the fishing households reported lower fish catch than previous year (NIS and MAFF, 2020). The total inland fish catch declined by 13.7% in 2019 and 22.7% in 2020 compared to 2018 (Figure 4). The drop in water level of the Mekong River and Tonle Sap Lake is one of the contributing factors to this decline in fish catch output. The monthly change in flow volume of the Tonle Sap Lake in 2019 and 2020 were far below the long-term average (

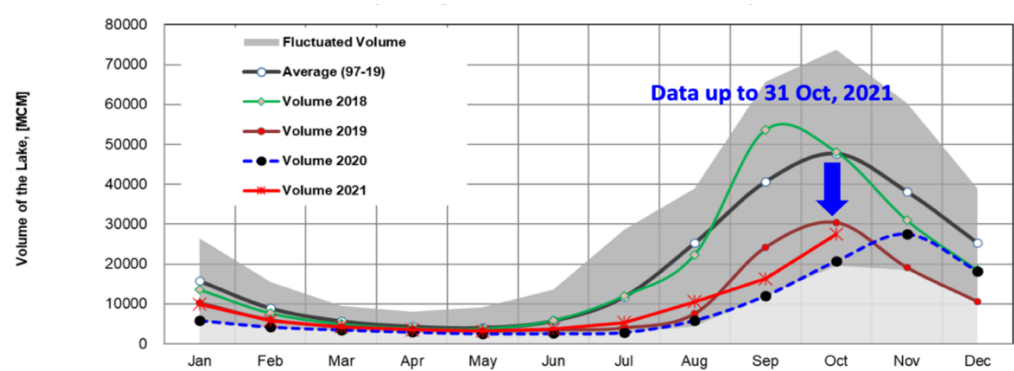
Figure 5). In addition, the use of destructive and illegal fishing practices, water pollution from agrochemical, plastic and industrial wastes, and clearance of flooded forests and mangroves are seriously threatening the freshwater and marine ecosystems.

Figure 4: Trend in inland and marine fish catch 1993-2020



Source: Author’s compilation of data from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries

Figure 5: Monthly change in flow volume of the Tonle Sap Lake



Source: Mekong River Commission, 2021

2.3 Impact on Natural Resources and Biodiversity

Although data and evidence are limited, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacts on the natural resources and biodiversity in different forms. A rapid assessment by USAID on impact of COVID-19 on community livelihoods and natural resources (July 2020) found that there has been an increasing number of natural resource offenses (Illegal logging and land clearance) reported by communities living inside or closed to Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary, Kulen Promtep Wildlife Sanctuary, and Chhaeb Wildlife Sanctuary. The majority of surveyed community members reported that local authorities have taken measures including patrols and awareness raising in response to the increase in natural resources offenses, but the efforts might not be enough to combat the offenses. The majority suggested conducting more frequent patrols or joint patrols with local authorities and relevant stakeholders, while actions such awareness raising, local stakeholder collaboration, and law enforcement against natural resource offenses need to be strengthened (USAID, 2020).

Income shocks posed by COVID-19 and return of migrant workers are likely to put further pressures on the ongoing natural resources depletion in Cambodia. This may occur in the form of forest clearing for farming, extraction of forest, wildlife and fisheries resources for food and income. All of these behaviours have occurred in the past as survival strategies and opportunistic gain (MAFF, CARD and FAO, 2020). Several studies documented that households are more likely to extract natural resources in response to shocks (Nguyen et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2015; López-Feldman, 2014). Nguyen et al. (2020) found that floods, droughts and livestock diseases increased the likelihood of households in Stung Treng province of Cambodia to extract natural resources. Evidence-based analysis of COVID-19 crisis triggering an acceleration of extraction of natural resources is required in order to validate the above assumption and to inform policy decision making.

3. Impact of COVID-19 on social issues (education and gender as anchors)

3.1 COVID-19 Impacts on SDG 4: Education

Quality Education Cambodia has successfully achieved Education for All. However, it has been struggling to improve the quality, which falls on CSDG 4 (Quality of Education). COVID-19 forced the government to close schools in April and now allows for the reopening to all schools in stage 3. During the closure of the schools, most of the world's children have been deprived of formal education during the COVID-19 outbreak—a legacy that could threaten the SDGs' underlying ambition to leave no one behind. Available data suggest Cambodia's significant progress on many fronts in the education sector. The completion rate at primary and secondary levels, and the proportion of grade 1 students who passed through all ECE programs has increased from 80.0 percent, 39.0 percent, and 62.0 percent in 2015 to 86.1 percent, 47.6 percent and 72 percent, respectively, in 2018. Despite good progress based on quantitative measurement such as the enrolment rate, COVID-19 has affected the goal 4 in delivering quality education and at the same time widening the inequality gap for the access of education.

After the closure of the school, students were placed on e-Learning mode, and as the teachers and the students were not prepared for the new method of learning, the delivery of education service were disrupted or provided poorly. Based on an interview with a high school teacher at a private school in Phnom Penh, online teaching and learning proves to be less effective than physical classroom as students are teachers new to the teaching and learning methods. And the facilities such as the internet access and devices do not support. Half of the students who are able to access e-learning or self-learning at home spend less than 10 hour a week to study, which equates to only around half of their normal time studying in the classroom. Economic hardship means families must make choices between sending their children to school or paid work; all of these will affect the CSDG4. Dropout rates could be high particularly among children from ID-Poor households.

In Cambodia, teachers and students, particularly in rural areas, do not have reliable internet access and are not capable of using emerging technology, making online learning a difficult, if not frustrating, experience for many (see Flynn & Himel, 2020). Despite the efforts by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) to provide online learning opportunities by disseminating video lessons through television and other online platforms such as MoEYS Facebook page, YouTube channel, and e-learning website, the number of students who have had access to online learning is still low (UNESCO, 2020).

The sudden shift to online learning has also created an unexpected workload, particularly on building e-platforms and integrating external applications into their systems in a timely manner (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). The extra workload has caused stress and anxiety for teachers and administrators (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Winthrop, 2020).

There are many other challenges. For instance, online or distance learning amid the pandemic has created more stress, frustration, and isolation for students who have lost the opportunity for peer interactions (Daniel, 2020; Gillett-Swan, 2017). The unprecedented shift to online learning has also increased concerns regarding cybersecurity, cyberbullying, online violence and exploitation, and other psychological issues caused by difficulties and uncertainties associated with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Daniel, 2020; Yan, 2020).

3.2 COVID-19 Impacts on SDG5: Gender

The COVID-19 outbreak is leading to numerous examples of emerging negative gender impacts in Cambodia. The already unequal division of household tasks is further exacerbated through caring for children during school closure. In families where men and women are migrant workers and have returned to their communities, women usually take care of the house and family, and men will try to find work.

Decision making and empowerment is strongly linked to income generation. With the loss of livelihoods of women factory workers and domestic workers in country and abroad, inequality in decision making is likely to increase and women's' needs might not be considered in the allocation of household budget. As a result of domestic duties, women have less time to engage in paid labour therefore they are at a disadvantage economically. With the closure of schools due to COVID-19 their time for economic activities will be further limited. Those who are in the formal employment

sector, find themselves at greater risk for exposure to the disease as they are still required to go to work, and others have experienced sudden unemployment due to the economic impact. Therefore COVID-19 poses a serious threat to women's engagement in economic activities especially in informal sectors and can increase gender gaps and women's empowerment.

Factory and migrant workers are usually not engaged in community groups, but in labour unions. This should be considered when distributing COVID-19 information via groups and networks.

While health facilities are still offering their normal services people try to avoid using them due to the fear of getting infected with COVID-19. There is a lack of trust in health services on sub national level. If the COVID19 cases are going to increase, patients may present directly to national and provincial hospitals as has been the case in previous dengue outbreaks, which might exceed the capacity of the health services and reduce their capacity for other acute treatments.

Increased levels of stress and anxiety due to financial insecurity and isolation negatively affect the mental health of women and men and fuels conflict in the households with risk of increased gender-based violence.

There is increased stigmatisation and discrimination of certain population groups such as migrant workers, urban population, Muslims, foreigners and women working in bars and entertainment as these minority groups are associated with carrying and spreading COVID-19.

The existing gender gap in accessing information and education is growing due to increased importance of digital technologies for updated information and home schooling. Poor families and illiterate parents have limited opportunities to support education of their children and girls are likely to absorb additional work of caring for younger sibling.

Community members fear COVID-19 infection. There is still uncertainty around transmission and at-risk groups. Vulnerable groups such as people with disability, the elderly and the poor do not have access to bespoke information regarding their needs and rely on household visits by community workers. When female migrant workers need to stay in organised quarantine upon their return to Cambodia, they are likely to require further support for their safety.

3.3 COVID-19 Impacts on SDG3: Good Health and Well-Being

Mental health is in critical condition for all Cambodia as they are scared of the virus. Some people feel very insecure, but they need to go out for work or earn income. The reduction in food consumption due to households' job loss or loss of income earning opportunity also poses challenges for the progress of the CSDG3 as children will be suffered from malnutrition.

Therefore, Cambodia is not different from other countries will experienced on achieving zero poverty by 2030. COVID-19 threatens to reverse the progress of SDG3, which aims to ensure healthy lives and wellbeing for all during this crisis. While Cambodia has made a good progress on achieving the Goal, more work will need to be accelerated as reported that in 2014, 32 percent of Cambodian children under 5 were stunted, and it is still considered very high based on WHO/UNICEF prevalence thresholds. Children in rural areas are more likely to be stunted than

children in urban areas. Prevalence of overweight or obesity among women of reproductive age increased substantially from only 6 percent in 2000, to 11 percent in 2010 and 18 percent in 2014 (CDHS 2014).

Currently, health system in Cambodia is struck by COVID-19 in various fronts, which may lead to the delay in the progress of the implementation of CSDG3. The MOH has changed the focus from improving general health care of Cambodia, to mainly on the prevention of the pandemic and the setting up team for taking care of COVID-19 patients. There are three challenges that poses the constraint on the progress of SDG and LDC graduation. This requires personnel and resources. Fighting with COVID-19 also requires financial resources for tracing and screening for virus.

Moreover, as Cambodia lacks skilled personnel in dealing with the pandemic, there is a need for training. Therefore, other activities related to the general improvement of people's health have been delayed, less focused. Health status of the people has improved through expansion and increased coverage of medical facilities together with increased social health protection system and measures to improve financing of the sector. Coping up strategy for poor families is the reduction of food consumption which has adverse effects on the family members health especially on children which is linked to CSDG2 and 3.

A rapid assessment conducted by UNEP shows that insufficient access to water for cleaning and sanitation, particularly to protect from COVID-19, seems to be a growing concern in some areas and will presumably be worsened by climatic conditions and drought. Broadly, the women have stable access to water for household consumption, without relying on central water collection stations. Yet 27% of respondents, all from Takeo, have insufficient water to practice frequent hand washing. In general, knowledge about healthcare access and availability of equipment, vaccines and supplies is limited. About 42% of respondents either do not know of or don't have access to a doctor and a health clinic. Only half of the respondents noted that healthcare workers have access to personal protective equipment while a majority did not know. Nearly half of the respondents further did not know of how equipped the clinic was or didn't think it was adequately so. 42% of respondents reported that the health clinic has a vaccine refrigerator (all from Takeo province), while 4% said no and 54% said they did not know (mostly from Pursat province).

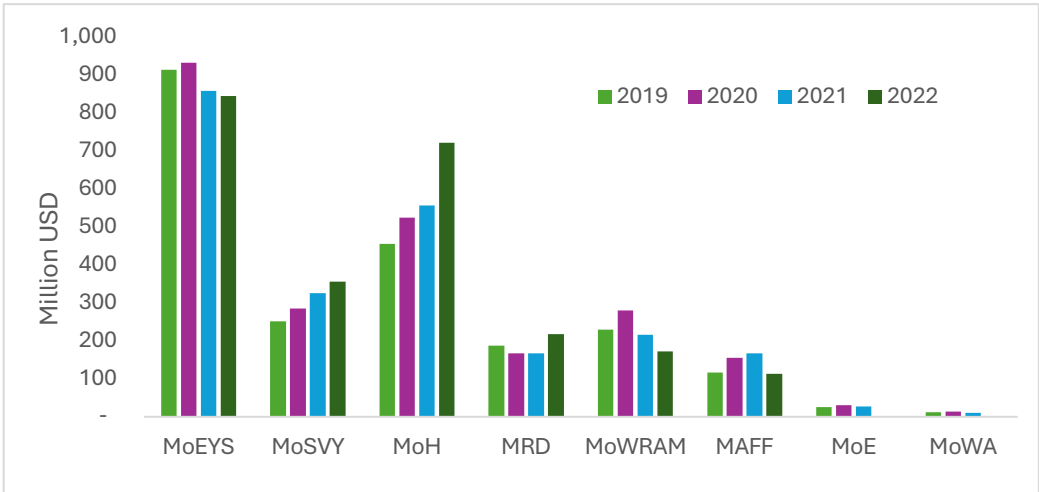
4. Government Response and Recovery Plan

4.1 COVID-19 Impacts on Ministerial Budget

The national budget cuts caused by the pandemic, and the priorities for social and economic sector, and recovery could undermine government efforts in addressing the environmental protection and natural resources conservation. The national budget for 2021 was cut by 4 percent compared to 2020. In 2022, the national budget will be increased by 8.4 percent compared to 2021. The social and health sector are the priority sector during the pandemic. The Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation (MoSVY) and Ministry of Health (MoH) have received a budget increase by 14 percent, and 6 percent in 2021, respectively. The budget for the MoSVY and MoH will continue to increase for 2022, which will be 10 and 30 percent, respectively (Figure). The MoE with mandate for protection and conservation of natural resources received a budget cut by 7

percent in 2021. The annual budget allocation for the MoE before the pandemic was relatively small, which were 0.48 and 0.36 percent of the national budget in 2019 and 2020. This limited financial resource does not allow MoE to adequately protect over 7 million hectares of the protected areas. Protected areas (PAs) are patrolled by just 1,260 Rangers which means that each Ranger is responsible for more than 5,000 hectares of land, an area too large for effective management (MoE, 2021).

Figure 6: Budget allocation by ministries 2019-2022



Source: Author’s compilation from the Budget Laws 2019, 2020 and 2021, and MEF’s executive summary of the draft Budget Law for 2022. Exchange rate used: 4,000KHR = 1USD

The collapse of tourism industry- community-based ecotourism- could result in less protection of the natural resources. Community-based ecotourism plays essential roles in protecting the natural resources. The impacts could be in two ways. Firstly, the drops in revenue generated by local communities who are directly involved in the management and protection of local natural resources would disincentivize them from conducting regular patrols. Secondly, the closure of the ecotourism sites and absence of rangers would provide opportunity to offenders to cut trees and hunt wildlife.

4.2 Recovery Plan

Cambodia is getting ready to launch a 2021-2023 plan to lift the economy out of the Covid-19 rut and chart a course for sustainable and inclusive growth. Centred on enhancing competitiveness and promoting economic diversification, the plan will be firmly grounded on maintaining a strong industrial base with high export capacity and stronger links with regional and global supply chains. It is expected that Cambodia’s economic growth at 4.8 per cent for 2022, if the coronavirus outbreak has eased after widespread vaccination, ushering in the emergence of a ‘new normal’.

The Kingdom has been drawing up three priority strategies to return the economy to a high growth path – “economic recovery”, “reforms” and “building resilience”. Although the global socio-

economic situation remains highly uncertain due to the prolongation of Covid-19, Cambodia may also have some opportunities. This hinges on Cambodia's ability and capacity to adapt to the changing regional and global situation, as well as to know how to leverage favourable conditions to enhance economic competitiveness and improve the investment environment, to attract more investment and business – which could pour out of areas involved in trade disputes or that are politically unstable – as well as shift regional supply chains to Cambodia.

“Economic recovery”, the first of the three priority strategies, entails building a strong foundation for moving the economy back into growth territory, with a focus on safety, impact management, the revival and stabilisation of viable businesses – especially in the most affected sectors – and the rapid creation of new jobs.

“Reforms” covers the continued introduction of key reform measures as instruments designed to improve, among other things, trade facilitation, investment and business, promotion apparatuses and digitalisation in economic systems used in the public and private sectors, he said.

“Building resilience” involves strengthening preparedness and response capacity to disease outbreaks or similar public emergencies that could emerge in the future and focuses on the development of solid health and social protection systems, effective social intervention programming, and ensuring the sustainability and inclusivity of socio-economic rehabilitation and development.

In order to be successful in all of these strategies, Cambodia needs to increase its commitment and focus on firm efforts and high political will, putting the national interest first in the fight against Covid-19 and accelerate reforms in all areas, especially in public institutions and their capacity building, to ensure that Cambodia can achieve its long-term development vision. The Ministry of Economy and Finance noted that the Covid-19 health crisis has led to dwindling global demand, supply chains disruptions, declining people flows and a loss of investment confidence, all of which dragged Cambodia's economic growth in 2020 down to minus 3.1 per cent.

In 2021, the February 20 community outbreak, coupled with the arrival of the Delta variant and a recent surge in imported cases, prompted the Kingdom to revise its economic growth forecast for 2021 to 2.4 per cent, down from 4.0 per cent at the beginning of the year.

4.3 Policy Responses in Agro-food Industry

The Royal Government of Cambodia has adopted three Rs approaches for the socio-economic recovery after COVID-19. The first approach is “Recovery”, focusing on health, private sector financing, fiscal policy, agriculture, tourism and garments. The second approach is “Reforms”, which aims to build a solid foundation for growth, diversification and competitiveness. The third approach is “Resiliency”, focusing on the digital sector, small and medium enterprise (SME) development, skills development, green economic recovery and strengthening the social protection system.

- The Royal Government of Cambodia has launched several policy responses including tax exemption on affected sectors, social protection program through cash transfer to the poor

and vulnerable households, and provision of special fund program to support agriculture sector;

- The SME Co-financing Scheme II has been launched since August 16, 2021 in collaboration with 28 Participated Financial Institutions (PFIs) to support the SMEs. As of 30th November, about USD 99.8 million in loan (almost 100% of the initial reserved fund of USD 100 million) were disbursed to 790 SMEs. As a result of this increasing demand and to align with economic recovery plan initiated by the RGC, SME Bank of Cambodia alongside Participated Financial Institution (PFIs) have recently decided to provide an additional budget of USD 40 million for SME Co-financing Scheme II (SCFS II), which adds up to USD 140 million⁷⁴;
- On July 22, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries submitted a letter to the Ministry of Economy and Finance to request for intervention to help procure rice from farmers and facilitate rice exports. As a result, the Agricultural and Rural Development Bank (ARDB) has reserved a package of USD 80 million to provide loans to rice millers to purchase rice from farmers⁷⁵;
- In 2020, the RGC has set up a special fund of USD 50 million managed by ARDB as part of the intervention package in response to COVID crisis in order to support SMEs in agriculture sector, agro-processing and agri-business for vegetable and fruit, aquaculture, livestock production;
- Accelerate structural reforms to raise potential growth and improve overall competitiveness;
- Launch an online business registry and carry out a campaign to encourage formalization of SMEs;
- Khmer Enterprise and Wing Bank (Cambodia) Plc have entered into a strategic partnership to boost the operations of SMEs in four key priority sectors; namely Agriculture, Manufacturing, Services and ICT, providing them with the opportunity to access loans from Wing Bank and its financial digital ecosystem;
- In response to the challenges and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2021, Khmer Enterprise has filtered almost 700 applications, among which 59 startups and SMEs were chosen to receive government grants⁷⁶;
- The following measures are planned for 2022 to support SMEs and agro-industries⁷⁷:

⁷⁴ <https://smebankcambodia.com.kh/2021/12/03/increased-to-usd-140-million/>

⁷⁵ <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50904458/ardb-receives-80-million-in-funding-to-support-rice-sector/>

⁷⁶ <https://www.wingmoney.com/en/khmer-enterprise-and-wing-bank-join-hands/>

⁷⁷ H.E Veng Sakhon post on Facebook on 15 November, 2021. Results from a closed-door online meeting to review and discuss the drafting of a strategic framework and programs to restore and promote Cambodia's economic growth under the chairmanship of HE Dr. Aun Porn Moniroth, Deputy Prime Minister, and Minister of the Economy and Finance and Chairman of the Economic and Financial Policy Committee.

- Set up a financing mechanism with a total budget of approximately USD 250 million to provide low interest loan (5% to 5.5%) through the SME Bank of Cambodia and the ARDB for key sectors such as agro-processing, animal husbandry, ecotourism or other priority sectors;
- Develop a pilot project to provide 40% of Grant Matching to farmers/producers who invest in building the greenhouses/nethouses for growing vegetables on 5 hectares or more, or who has been in contract farming or is planning to implement contract farming with private companies;
- Establish a mechanism to waive or suspend value-added tax (VAT) and import tariff on materials for the construction of greenhouses, nethouses, drip irrigation pipes, sprinklers, used for growing vegetables, machinery and tools/equipment used for production, processing and supply, treatment facility to kill fruitflies (Chiller Machine), cooling fan for livestock, automatic feeding machine;
- Encourage private investment in cold-chain transport systems through the mechanism of exempting or suspending import duties and value added taxes for cold-chain containers used for the transport of fresh yellow bananas and mangoes to international markets;
- Promote the production of foundation seeds and certified seeds of fragrance rice (Phka Rumduol and Sen Kra Ob), cassava and cashew varieties, which are of good quality and tolerant to pest and diseases and climate change through PPP;
- Strengthen the capacity of producer groups, associations and agricultural cooperatives and promote the implementation of contract farming between producer groups, associations and agricultural cooperatives, with companies that procure and process agricultural products in the mango, cashew, cassava and vegetable sub-sectors;
- Strengthen the dissemination of Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and sanitary and phytosanitary requirements for mango, Pailin longan, pepper, durian and coconut to farmers, producer groups and farming agricultural cooperatives;
- Continue to promote investment and maintenance of small-scale irrigation systems connecting main canals and rural roads through the mechanism of the Cash for Work programme;
- Invest in the wholesale market for quality control and certification systems, including e-phyto, traceability systems, and supporting infrastructure such as cold storage facilities through PPP at the public and/or private owned sites with high potential to be vegetable collection centers with the first phase piloting in Phnom Penh, Battambang and Tbong Khmum;

- Promote public investment in community-level fish distribution centers, and post-harvest infrastructure such as cold storage facility and quality testing facility;
- Examine the possibility of establishing agro-industrial parks for potential agricultural products through public-private partnership mechanisms to promote the development and enhance the economic efficiency of agricultural processing enterprises;
- Expedite the process for signing of protocol on sanitary and phytosanitary for the import of Pailin longan, durian, pepper, perfume coconut and negotiations on the exemption of import duties on rubber products with China;
- Harmonization and integration of action plans and projects related to agriculture and agro-industry, supported by the state budget and partner budgets in the strategy on public investment management reform;
- Study the cost of agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides, animal feed and examine the possibility of reducing import tariff;
- Promote the preparation and implementation of the "Agricultural Development Policy 2021-2030.

4.4 Policy Responses in Tourism Industry

Phase 1: Crisis management in the new normal phase and planning for recovery (2020-2021)

The Royal Government of Cambodia has already set out and subsequently put the intervention measures into practice (including tourism sector and services) for ten rounds, with the summary of key supporting measures as follows:

- Provide subsidy USD 40 per month per employee in tourism businesses, including hotels, guesthouses, restaurants, and tour agencies until December 2021.
- Exemption of monthly tax payment for hotels, guesthouses, restaurants, tour agencies, which are registered in the General Department of Taxation and located in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Preah Sihanouk, Kep, Kampot, Poi Pet, and Bavet until December 2021.
- Exemption of payment of insurance premiums for occupational risk and health care (NSSF) during the time of business suspension.
- Exemption from fees for the renewal of all kinds of tourism licenses for 2021.
- The Ministry of Tourism has set out and is effectively implementing: (1). Tourism Safety Measures, (2). Promoting the local tourism movement and (3). Tourism skill training (online).

Phase 2: Recovery of tourism sector in Cambodia in the post COVID-19 (2022-2023)

- To recover Cambodia's tourism sector after COVID-19 crisis (2022-2023) and minimize the impact of COVID-19 crisis, the Royal Government will continue to provide vocational training, digital skills and recent skills in line with market demands after COVID-19 crisis and efforts to enhance the prestige of Cambodia as a safe tourism destination after COVID-19 crisis.
- The Royal Government will also establish a stimulus package to support priority projects such as the development of new tourism products, strengthening the quality of tourism, establishing the National Tourism Vocational Schools in the priority tourism poles, encouraging the new tourism business models with creativity and innovation, promoting new Startups in tourism sector, capturing digital technology, building capacity of public relations and promoting tourism, etc.

Phase 3: Preparation for the new future of tourism sector in Cambodia (2024-2025)

- The RGC will promote the development of smart tourism, diversify tourism products and continue to development and train human resource.
- The RGC will continue to invest in tourism promotion campaigns, promote and attract Long-haul tourism markets to Cambodia, organize and promote major international events, and strengthen the domestic tourism movements to be sustainable.
- The RGC will continue the implementation of national, sub-national governance mechanisms (towards Digital Government), along with strengthening the mechanism of Destination Management Organization in priority tourism destinations for sustainability.

- The RGC conduct resilient mechanism and better responses to future crises in tourism sector by conducting a review of implementation processes in response to COVID-19 and creating better Crisis Management plan to face future crises.

4.5 Assessment on Government Cash Transfer Intervention

Results from the household phone survey conducted by the Ministry of Economy and Finance in mid 2020 showed that over 95 percent of the beneficiaries received right amount of CT money communicated to them. Regardless the issue of incorrect amount of CT transferred mentioned earlier, 99.1 percent of the surveyed beneficiaries expressed their satisfaction with this Cash Transfer programme, which happened at the right time for them to alleviate their hardship. Likewise, more than 96 percent reported that this cash distribution was fair. Two factors were identified as culprits for causing this negative sentiment, high transportation cost and technical issues during cash-out. Nonetheless, it happened that one third of the surveyed households did not clear know selection criterion for being included in CT assistance programme.

The modality of the CT was innovative in the sense that the ID number on the ID Poor card was used as WING account number for beneficiaries. Since there were many Wing agents across the countries, it was very convenient for beneficiaries to go cash out their transferred money. The result from the survey suggested that on average, a recipient spent 25 minutes to go from their house to a nearest wing agent and another 17 minutes for waiting for their turn at the Wing counter. The transfer process was overall smooth, fast and safe and received a great deal of appreciation from all beneficiaries.

Table 1: Operational Aspects and Satisfactions

Characteristics	Sub Categories	HHH Gender		Strata		Agro-climatic zones					Cambodia
		F	M	R	U	PP	Plains	T.Sap	Plateau	Coastal	Cambodia
Right amount	no	1.3	1.6	1.3	3.5	2.6	2.1	0.0	2.0	1.3	1.5
	yes	96.9	94.9	95.9	93.0	97.4	96.7	100.0	91.1	98.8	95.7
	DK	1.8	3.4	2.7	3.5	0.0	1.3	0.0	7.0	0.0	2.8
Same day	no	4.7	3.8	4.4	1.2	5.1	3.8	3.0	6.1	1.3	4.1
	yes	95.3	96.2	95.6	98.8	94.9	96.3	97.0	93.9	98.8	95.9
Cash-out issue	no	85.2	85.5	85.0	89.8	95.0	92.1	82.0	85.3	77.5	85.4
	yes	14.8	14.5	15.0	10.2	5.0	7.9	18.0	14.7	22.5	14.6
Cash Transfer	very satisfied	86.3	81.1	82.2	92.1	55.0	80.0	83.0	85.8	88.8	83.1
	satisfied	12.7	18.1	16.8	8.0	45.0	17.5	16.0	13.9	11.3	16.0
	not very satisfied	1.0	0.8	1.0	0.0	0.0	2.5	1.0	0.3	0.0	0.9

Source: MEF survey 2020

5. Partnership and Multi-stakeholder engagement

The SDGs can only be realized with strong global partnerships and cooperation. Partnership for the could be done as follows: - The international community must support developing countries in mobilizing adequate resources to allow their health systems to cope with the emergency, while effectively assisting vulnerable segments of the population and small businesses. - Containing the social costs of the pandemic requires averting further damage, be it as a result of balance of payment crises, of food price hikes in net-importing countries, or of debt vulnerabilities. This calls

for concerted action to provide adequate international liquidity, adopt a comprehensive debts standstill arrangement, and, where appropriate, extend renewed debt relief. - It is crucial to avoid major disruptions to domestic and regional food and agricultural value chains, which would further strain vulnerable households. With the immediate socio-economic impact of the pandemic mainly affecting the urban population, the viability of agriculture is fundamental to preserve livelihoods in rural areas, contain price spikes for staple foods, and limit food import bills at a time when foreign exchange is scarce.

National and international efforts to revitalize the economy should be directed into viable investments to foster structural transformation and spur the transition towards a low-carbon economy, as a key avenue to build resilience, generate employment, and establish/strengthen social protection. The World Bank, ADB, UN agencies and other development agencies have pledged to postCOVID-19 recovery assistance. For example, Australia is working with Cambodia to address the social and economic impacts of the pandemic and support Cambodia's recovery and progress toward a more resilient and inclusive middle-income country. Improve access to public services and help build social protection systems, particularly for women and people with disabilities will be the main focuses. In which, the \$9.5 million Australia-UNDP Resilience Fund ('the Fund') for Cambodia is supporting economic modelling of COVID-19 impacts on growth, employment, and poverty, and helping RGC assess policy responses. Through the Fund, the ACCC will support Cambodia's Ministry of Commerce to implement the new Consumer Protection Law, protecting consumers from unfair or misleading trade practices, on the rise since COVID-19. The Fund will also boost the uptake of e-commerce, with a focus on female-run businesses. It will help to establish hygiene protocols at Cambodia's border crossings, to reduce disruptions to regional trade.

UN's Partnerships for Development

In 2021, partnership between UN agencies and CSOs concentrated on building peace and institutions (CSD16) in term of projects and on zero hunger (CSDG2), quality education (CSDG4) and health and well-being (CSDG3) in term of grant. Table 1 shows the UN-CSO joint projects in 2021 which have been distributed based on CSDGs and the amount of fund required for each CSDGs. As can be seen, there are 8 CSDGs that are funded by the UN agencies and implemented by CSOs. Among the 8 CSDGs, the highest number of projects jointly implemented by the UN-CSO is the CSDG16, accounted for 18 projects followed by Goal 3, accounting for 11 projects, and Goal 4, accounting for 8 projects. CSDG 5, CSDG 2, CSDG 1, 8 and 14 receives 4, 3, 2, 2 and 1 projects, respectively.

Despite CSDG8 and CSDG2 received fewer projects than CSDG16, the amount funding of two former is much larger than that of the latter. The total funding of CSDG4 accounts for 11,000,000 \$US (36.7%) and for CSDG2 accounts for 10,700,000 \$US (35.7%). CSDG16 received around 3,000,000 \$US (9.8%), which is slightly below to that of CSDG3, accounting for about 32,000,000 \$US (10.8%). Each of the rest 4 CSDGs received from 380,000 \$US for CSDG8 to 815,000 \$US for CSDG1. CSDG14 was allocated with 470,000 \$US and CSDG5 was allocated with 431,2919 \$US.

Table 2: List of UN-NGO joint projects by CSDG targets from 2019-2021

CSDGs		Number of Projects	Total Fund Required		
			US\$	%	
1	End poverty		2	815,400	2.7%
2	Zero hunger		3	10,700,000	35.7%
3	Health & well-being		11	3,236,700	10.8%
4	Quality education		8	11,000,000	36.7%
5	Gender quality		4	431,929	1.4%
8	Decent work & growth		2	381,063	1.3%
14	Life below water		1	470,000	1.6%
16	Peace and Institution		18	2,932,989	9.8%
Total			49	29,968,081	100.0%

Source: Author's estimation based on UNDAF report

This allocation of fund from UN agencies to CSOs toward these eight CSDGs above, reaffirms UN's commitment to ensure that Cambodia can achieve inclusive, equitable, sustainable recovery and prosperity, reflected the UN's strategic priorities in the Common Country Analysis (CCA). The CCA outlines the following key strategic priorities for UN to focus to ensure that Cambodia can achieve inclusive, equitable, sustainable recovery and prosperity. This includes:

- 1) strengthening pandemic health response and vaccination;
- 2) elevating human capital development; and

green growth and the digital economy, underpinned by an overarching commitment to gender-transformative recovery from the pandemic and promoting and protecting human rights.

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The Impacts of COVID-19 on Students with Disabilities

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1. Introduction

In Cambodia, there are 689,532 persons with disabilities, of which 74.3% are partial disabilities, 19.4% are serious disabilities, and 6.3% are absolute disabilities.⁷⁸ Persons with disabilities are protected by international conventions and local laws aiming to ensure that persons with disabilities can fully enjoy freedoms and rights, including but not limited to the right to non-discrimination, right to participation and inclusion in society, equality in opportunities, right to accessibilities and equal treatments, and that their dignities are respected as human beings.⁷⁹ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted on July 3, 2009 has defined persons with disabilities as *“those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others”*.⁸⁰ Similarly, Cambodia’s Law on the Protection and the Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities promulgated on July 3, 2009 has also defined persons with disabilities as *“any persons who lack, lose, or damage any physical or mental functions, which result in a disturbance to their daily life or activities, such as physical, visual, hearing, intellectual impairments, mental disorders and any other types of disabilities toward the insurmountable end of the scale.”*⁸¹ In short, persons with disabilities are those whose abilities have been reduced due to physical, mental, or sensory impairment.

The rights of persons with disabilities to education are protected and materialized through other legal instruments including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Constitution of Cambodia, and Cambodia’s Law on the Protection and the Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Persons with disabilities have been promoted through various policies, including the National Strategy on Persons with Disabilities 2019-2023. Related to the promotion of the education of persons with disabilities in Cambodia, special

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⁷⁸ National Institute of Statistics, Ministry of Planning, Census of the population in the Kingdom of Cambodia 2019, National Report on Final Results, October 2020, page 125.

⁷⁹ See ILO Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled Persons) Convention (No. 159), 1983; UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities, adopted on 03 July 2009; and Cambodia’s Law on the Protection and the Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities dated 03 July 2009.

⁸⁰ UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities, adopted on 03 July 2009, Article 1, paragraph 2.

⁸¹ Cambodia’s Law on the Protection and the Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities promulgated in 03 July 2009, Article 4.

education has been the focus of the Government of Cambodia through the adoption of the Policy on Education for Children with Disabilities in 2008 which was revised as the Policy on Inclusive Education by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) in 2018.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic since early 2020 in Cambodia caused a public health crisis and consequently led to social and economic difficulties for individuals, businesses, and government. The pandemic especially affected persons with disabilities as it jeopardized their employment, travel restrictions made it even more difficult for them to access services, and other Covid-19 pandemic preventive measures put them at risk of social isolation. Covid-19 has also impacted education on many fronts, challenging achievement of the Sustainable Development Goal 4. The MoEYS decided to close all educational institutions, including all public and private schools, on March 16, 2020. School closures have resulted in the disruption of learning in all of Cambodia's 13,482 schools, affecting 3,210,285 students of which half are female, and 93,225 teachers (MoEYS, 2021). Within the education sector, students with disabilities are found to be even more severely impacted by the pandemic both in terms of living situation and their learning opportunities.

This study examines the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the education of students with disabilities, reviews related laws and policies, and identifies strategies to respond to the pandemic. A combination of qualitative interviews and findings from reports and academic journals are discussed. The study also puts forth recommendations.

2. Research Objectives and Questions

There have been several discussions on the social and economic consequences of Covid-19 on persons with disabilities in Cambodia; however, less research has been conducted to provide concrete evidence of the impacts and very few studies have provided policy recommendations to cope with the adverse social and economic effects. Therefore, the objectives of this study are:

1. To review current Cambodia's laws and policies related to the rights of persons with disabilities, in particular the right to education;
2. To review legal frameworks and/or interventions related to the rights to education of persons with disabilities in selected foreign countries in ASEAN, Australia, etc. in the Covid-19 period;
3. To examine the responses of the government of Cambodia in promoting the rights to education of people with disabilities during the Covid-19 era;
4. To explore the impacts of Covid-19 on persons with disabilities, especially those in special education in Cambodia; and
5. To propose recommendations to support persons with disabilities in future crises.

The study sets out the following research questions:

1. What are Cambodia's current laws and policies related to the rights of persons with disabilities and regarding special education in Cambodia?

2. What are the frameworks, responses, and/or lessons learned from other countries with regard to the law and policy implications and best practices that could support persons with disabilities in Cambodia and ease its adverse effects?
3. What was the government of Cambodia's response to help persons with disabilities during Covid-19?
4. What are the impacts of Covid-19 on persons with disabilities, specifically students in Cambodia?

3. Research methodology, scope and contribution of the study

This study undertook desk reviews, secondary data analysis, and qualitative interviews. The research team reviewed laws, policies, and existing reports on the social and economic impacts of Covid-19 on peoples with disabilities in Cambodia. The team also reviewed published articles, journal articles and grey literature, websites, and reports, related to the impacts of Covid-19 on students with disabilities both in Cambodia and in other countries. A workshop was organized to verify the results with relevant stakeholders.

Interviews were conducted with students, teachers, staff, and management to explore the challenges they faced during the pandemic. The study also conducted key informant interviews and/or group discussions with school management members. Phone call interviews were conducted with students' parents. A total of 9 school management team members, 22 teachers, 35 students with hearing difficulties, 33 students with visual impairments, and 10 parents of students with disabilities were interviewed.

Data analysis used qualitative analysis to categorize the interviews into themes or types of impacts. The findings were also discussed with the existing literature on the impact of Covid-19 on students with disabilities to compare and confirm the differences and similarities of the Cambodian case.

Disabilities come in various types. This study covers only two types – hard of hearing⁸² or deaf students and visually impaired or blind⁸³ students at the selected schools that provide special education and training to only students with the two types of disabilities.

The study contributes to academia and policy-making domains. Specifically, since this study focuses on students with disabilities, this study significantly contributes to the special education sector, which is one of the main priority areas of the Royal Government of Cambodia.

⁸² Hard of hearing refers to a hearing loss where there may be enough residual hearing that an auditory device, such as a hearing aid or FM system, provides adequate assistance to process speech.

⁸³ Visual impairments include low vision and blindness and refer to any degree of impairment to a person's ability to see that affects his or her daily life.

4. Reviews of Related Laws, Policies and Frameworks on People with Disabilities in Cambodia

4.1 The Constitution of Cambodia

The right to education is guaranteed in the Constitution of Cambodia of 1993. The Constitution, in particular Article 48, reads “*The State shall protect the rights of the children as stipulated in the Convention on Children, particular; the right to life, education, protection during wartime, and from economic or sexual exploitation...The State shall protect children from acts that are injurious to their education opportunities, health and welfare.*” The concept of education for all is also found in the supreme law. For example, Article 65 reads “*The State shall protect and upgrade citizens’ rights to quality education at all levels and shall take necessary steps for quality education to reach all citizens...*” Furthermore, Article 66 stipulates that “*The state shall establish a comprehensive and standardized educational system throughout the country that shall guarantee the principles of educational freedom and quality to ensure that all citizens have equal opportunity to earn a living.*” The Constitution, Article 68, requires that the State provides free primary and secondary education to all citizens in public schools and citizens must receive education for at least nine years.

4.2 Law on Education 2007

The education of persons with disabilities had not been stated in the law until the adoption of the Law on Education which was promulgated in 2007. The Law on Education reaffirms the guarantee of the provision of education for all persons and introduces the provision of the education of persons with disabilities. The Law on Education, Article 31 stipulates that “*Every citizen has the right to access qualitative education of at least 9 years in public school free of charge. The Ministry in charge of education shall gradually prepare the policy and strategic plans to ensure that all citizens obtain quality education as stipulated by this law.*”⁸⁴ Education of persons with disabilities falls under the special education of the Law on Education. Article 38 of the same law reads “*The state encourages and promotes to have special education for disabled persons and outstanding learners who are gifted and/or talented...Special education provided for outstanding learners appropriate to their intelligence and talent and provided a suitable education for disabled persons...Special education programs shall be formulated by Prakas of the Ministry in charge of Education.*”⁸⁵

Under the Law on Education, in the context of special education, a person with disabilities is called a disabled learner which refers to those who need facilitation or support for their education. They are learners who are disabled with either one or two of their legs, deaf, mute, blind in both of their

⁸⁴ Pursuant to glossary annexed to Law on Education 2007, qualitative education refers to a type of education which fulfills the needs for basic and continuing education for the whole lives of the learners.

⁸⁵ Pursuant to glossary annexed to Law on Education 2007, special education refers to education and training for any person who has special needs such as disabled learners.

eyes, or have mental disabilities. Under this law, the definition of disabled learners is not defined in the main text of the law. It is defined in the glossary which is attached as an annex.

Furthermore, the Law on Education, Article 39, has listed the rights of disabled learners or persons with disabilities as follows:

“Disabled learners have the same rights as able learners and have separate special rights as follows:

- *Disabled learners of either sex have the right to study with able learners if there is sufficient facilitation in the study process for the disabled learners to fulfill the educational program of the educational institutions;*
- *Disabled learners with special needs have the right to receive additional teaching in the regular educational program, which is not a particularly special educational program;*
- *Disabled learners who are not able to learn with able learners have the right to receive special education in separate special classes. These disabled learners can study at community schools in their locality.”*

According to the said Article 39 of the Law on Education, there are three main special rights of disabled learners in education. The first right of disabled learners aims to include and allow disabled learners to participate in educational institutions where able learners are studying. In realizing this right, there must be sufficient support and facilitation in the study process for the disabled learner to fulfill the educational program requirements of the said educational institution. The second right of disabled learners also aims to allow them to participate in the study process with the able learners. In realizing this inclusion, additional teaching under the regular educational program will be given to disabled learners who require special support. The third right of disabled learners aims to provide special education in a separate special class. The disabled learners will not participate in ordinary classrooms with able learners since special educational programs will be designed to provide education with quality to disabled learners. It is reasonable in the cases where the inclusion of disabled learners in the ordinary classroom of ordinary educational program will not provide education with quality. Hence, disabled learners and able learners should be separated; and special educational program should be given to disabled learners.

4.3 Law on the Protection and the Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2009

Two years after the promulgation of the Law on Education in 2007, the Law on the Protection and the Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was promulgated in 2009. If comparing the latter with the former, the latter provides more details on the right to education of persons with disabilities. If compared to the Law on Education, the Law on the Protection and the Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities seems to provide a definition of persons with disabilities in a broader sense. Article 4 of this Law reads “...*Persons with disabilities: refers to any persons who lack, lose, or damage any physical or mental functions, which result in a disturbance to their daily life or activities, such as physical, visual, hearing, intellectual impairments, mental disorders and*

any other types of disabilities toward the insurmountable end of the scale... ”. Under the same law, all pupils and students with disabilities are entitled to enrolment in public and private educational institutions and to scholarships.⁸⁶ The government is required to develop policies and national strategies for the education of pupils and students with disabilities in order to promote inclusive education for pupils and students with disabilities to the maximum extent possible and to establish special classes to fit the needs of the pupils and students with disabilities.⁸⁷ Pursuant to Article 29 of the same law, the Ministry in charge of education is also required to develop programs for educational institutions to provide accessible facilities for pupils and students with disabilities regarding the following:

- buildings, classrooms and study places;
- sign language and Braille;
- educational techniques and pedagogy corresponding to the types of disabilities;
- study materials or other equipment to assist pupils and students with disabilities;
- training and teaching materials for teachers or professors and others corresponding to the actual needs of each pupil and student with disabilities.

Furthermore, the Ministry in charge of Education must pay special attention to the educational needs of pupils and students with disabilities. Pupils and students with disabilities in poor families or military veterans with disabilities have the right to receive free education at public educational establishments at all levels and have access to study books and materials. Additionally, private educational establishments have the obligation to provide a special discount for school fees, textbooks, and stationery for pupils and students with disabilities or military veterans with disabilities.⁸⁸ The discount on school fees and stationery in private educational establishments will be determined by an inter-ministerial Prakas by the Ministers in charge of Social Affairs and Education. However, as of now, it is unknown whether there is such a Prakas. If there is no such Prakas, the rights of the pupils and students with disabilities will not be fulfilled.

Regarding the method and content of teaching to pupils and students with disabilities, the same law further requires the Ministry in charge of education to include sensitization to the causes of disabilities, disability prevention, and the value of persons with disabilities in the mainstream of education programs. It also requires pedagogical programs to train teachers and professors to develop their knowledge on disabilities and teaching methodology on teaching pupils and students with disabilities.⁸⁹ The same law further requires the Ministry in charge of information to disseminate information free of charge through state-run media to raise public awareness about disabilities and the rights of persons with disabilities in order to promote solidarity, understanding, and implementation of the rights of persons with disabilities. The private media networks must implement special programs contributing actively to the above activities.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Law on the Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article. 27.

⁸⁷ Law on the Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article. 28

⁸⁸ Law on the Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article. 30.

⁸⁹ Law on the Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article. 31.

⁹⁰ Law on the Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article. 32.

4.4 Cambodia Sustainable Development Goal (CSDG)

Cambodia has signed on to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal with country-specific targets. For Sustainable Development Goal No. 4- Quality Education: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, Cambodia's targets are:

4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and Goal-4 effective learning outcomes.

4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and preprimary education so that they are ready for primary education.

4.3 By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.

4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.

4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations.

4.6 By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy.

4.7 By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

4.A Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, nonviolent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.

4.B By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries.

4.C By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing states.

4.5 Rectangular Strategy of the Royal Government of Cambodia

The Rectangular Strategy Phase III states the government's commitment to "...Further implementing the national policy on disability through the Disability Action Council; strengthening the implementation of the Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and promoting the enhancement of rights and welfare of the disabled according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as well as improving the quality and efficiency of the disability fund's services"

4.6 The National Disability Strategic Plan (NDSP) 2014-2018

The National Disability Strategic Plan (NDSP) 2014-2018 outlines key strategic objectives and focuses on the reduction of poverty for persons with disabilities; provision of quality and equal health services as well as physical and mental rehabilitation; provision of access to justice and prevention from discrimination, abuse, mistreatment and exploitation of persons with disabilities; access to education and participation in expressing their voices; access to information and participation in political and development work; and facilitation for access to the physical environment, public transport and facilities, knowledge, information and communication; assurance of gender equality and promotion of capacity for women and children with disabilities; enhancement and expansion of international cooperation. The NDSP sets out ten strategies including 1) Increase primary and secondary education enrolment rates of children with disabilities; 2) Develop and increase study materials including Braille in formats that are readily accessible for children with disabilities; 3) Enhance teaching of life and social development skills to facilitate persons with disabilities full and equal participation in education and as members of the community; 4) Promote education for persons with disabilities particularly children who are blind, deaf or deaf blind, is delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual, and in environments which maximize academic and social development; 5) Increase and encourage number of teachers that are employed, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language and/or Braille, and to train professionals and staff who work at all levels of education; 6) Promote persons with disabilities to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others; 7) Promote reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities to access quality education; 8) Promote integration in teaching curriculum content, lessons and positive attitudes and actions towards persons with disabilities in preschool, primary and secondary education; 9) Increase the number of scholarship opportunities for students with disabilities to continue their education at tertiary levels of education; and 10) Provide opportunities to develop and utilize persons with disabilities creative, artistic and intellectual potential, not only for their own benefit, but also for the enrichment of society. Responsible institutions are the MoEYS; the Ministry of Economy and Finance; the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation; the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training; the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction; the Disability Action Council; development

partners, national and international non-governmental organizations, and self-help groups; and all relevant ministries and institutions.

4.7 Policy on Inclusive Education by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport in 2018

The Policy on Inclusive Education was issued in 2018 by the MoEYS. It envisions that all persons with special needs have the right to inclusive and equitable quality education and opportunities for life-long learning. The goal of the Policy on Inclusive Education is to educate all persons with special needs to have the knowledge, skills, and attitude necessary so that they are able to contribute to the development of society. The policy has the following objectives:

- To ensure early identification, assessment and timely intervention;
- To provide access to inclusive and equitable quality education and life-long learning opportunities;
- To build capacity and enhance professional development for all teachers as well as school management; and
- To raise awareness and promote participation.

More specifically, providing access to inclusive and equitable quality education includes:

- Ensuring the provision of school registration services for learners with special needs and enable them to receive appropriate education;
- Ensuring that the national curriculum and textbooks respond to the diverse needs of all learners with special needs;
- Ensuring that special education program is compatible with the national curriculum and that textbooks are available for use in all public and private educational institutions;
- Developing inclusive education program for learners who have intellectual disability;
- Introduce flexible teaching methodologies in the national curriculum that are student-centered, participatory pedagogy and culturally appropriate;
- Providing adequate teaching and learning materials to meet individual needs of all learners with special educational needs;
- Developing Individual Education Plans for all persons with special needs by identifying their learning or needs;
- Encouraging and supporting educational research activities of all persons with special needs;
- Developing a fair and flexible assessment to enable all persons with special needs to participate in the exam and provide them with “reasonable accommodation”;
- Developing Integrated Classes in all study grade levels to provide age-appropriate learning for all persons with special needs;
- Developing social assistance schemes to support persons with special needs;

- Including learners and university students with special needs into inclusive classes where possible;
- Introducing sporting services, arts, and other services appropriate to the needs of learners with special needs.

4.8 Cambodia Education Response Plan to COVID-19 Pandemic

The MoEYS issued Cambodia's Education Response Plan to the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020. Based on the plan, a COVID-19 mapping exercise was regularly carried out through the Education Sector Working Group (ESWG) and NGO partners to collect information on key activities being supported by development partners and NGOs in response to the outbreak in Cambodia. The mapping document has been updated periodically to support timely information sharing among MoEYS, ESWG members, and NGOs.

In early 2020, MoEYS sent out a letter to schools notifying them about the threat of COVID-19 and urging the adoption of good hygiene practice in schools. In mid-March, MoEYS closed schools in Siem Reap and Phnom Penh, and later called for a closure for all schools and education institutions across the country until further notice. The Ministry also subsequently announced teleworking arrangements for all education personnel. In April, MoEYS issued a directive on the implementation of distance learning and e-learning programmes at pre-primary, primary, and secondary education levels. Complementary to this directive, MoEYS developed an operational guideline to support the implementation of distance learning in pre-schools, primary schools, secondary general education schools, and targeted higher education institutions.

In early June, MoEYS issued guidelines on e-learning programs at teacher training institutions. The guidelines set out principles, measures, and necessary steps for all teacher training institutions to provide training and capacity development to teacher trainees, teacher educators, and management teams. The core strategic component of the MoEYS COVID-19 response was to develop distance learning services for children from early childhood education (ECE) through to secondary education. Expanding online learning for all children across different education levels continued over the coming months.

In March 2020, MoEYS began to prepare online lessons for Grade 9 and 12 students, as students in these grades have annual national examinations. Noting the extended school closures and the importance of supporting learning for all children (not just Grades 9 and 12), MoEYS developed distance learning content to reach students from ECE to Grade 12, including those from ethnic minority communities and children with hearing difficulties. These programmes could be accessed through Facebook and YouTube, and MoEYS also developed a U-Learning platform. With support from a variety of development partners, MoEYS broadcasted distance learning programmes through a new dedicated education television channel (TVK2) and through the radio. The TVK2 channel broadcasted content relevant to preschoolers through to upper secondary students, while

the current radio programmes focus on reaching parents and children engaged in pre-school and mid-level education (MLE), and students in pre-school and Grades 1–3.

For special education, efforts have been made to integrate Cambodian Sign Language into primary and secondary online and television e-lessons to enhance inclusivity. As of June 26, 2020, a total of 1,618 assets from ECE to Grade 12 had been produced, including 1,303 e-learning videos, of which 219 were integrated with sign language and 30 were converted and printed in braille; and 270 MLE radio spots were developed in three languages. Of the learning assets, 551 have been broadcast across various social media platforms, radio, or other mentioned channels.

Key strategies to promote the accessibility and inclusion of children with disabilities in the education response were prioritized. Some actions include: (i) sign language and subtitles for video content for children with hearing impairments; (ii) radio programmes for children with visual impairments; (iii) provision of learning devices/equipment and connectivity; and (iv) print media in braille for children with visual impairments. In addition to parents' efforts to support their children in distance learning, teachers also play a critical role in deepening the impact of continuous or distance learning programmes in Cambodia's COVID-19 response and recovery context. Strategies practiced in Cambodia in inclusive education include:

- Inclusive learning materials (paper-based and digital materials, integration of sign language for online learning assets);
- Assistive devices that support learning and mobilities of children with disabilities;
- Pre-service teacher training offered through distance and online sessions;
- Partnerships with NGOs providing home-based education for children with disabilities;
- Developing video clips for parents/caregivers to engage and play with their children with disabilities;
- Provision of Hygiene and Sanitation supplies to prepare for safe schools reopening;
- MoEYS issued guidelines around distance learning, home-based and small group learning, and remedial teaching.

To implement the strategies and practices in inclusive education, the MoEYS conducted the follow key activities:

- Up-skilling: developing digital literacy learning
- Mitigate learning loss: implement the adapted remedial program in special education schools
- Provision supplies: source audio-visual equipment, power supply for remote schools, and easy-read printed materials
- Support ongoing Teachers' Capacity building on inclusive education: Pre-service and In-service trainings
- Safety measures: Continued health preventive measures and practices.

5. ASEAN Frameworks Related to Persons with Disabilities and COVID-19 Responses

5.1 ASEAN Enabling Master Plan 2025: Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Enabling Masterplan 2025 seeks to complement the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 in mainstreaming the rights of persons with disabilities across all pillars of the ASEAN Community and to foster Member States' commitment towards an inclusive community. It is guided by the underlying principles that for all actions concerning persons with disabilities whether undertaken by individuals, public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies or entities, their interests and needs must be taken into consideration, acknowledging that inclusion and mainstreaming should be promoted, and specialized approaches considered as a last resort. Additionally, the Enabling Masterplan serves as a key instrument in steering its policies and programs to be inclusive for persons with disabilities.

5.2 Bali Declaration on the Enhancement of The Role and Participation of the Persons with Disabilities in ASEAN Community and Mobilization Framework of the ASEAN Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2011-2020).

ASEAN Leaders, as the representatives of ASEAN Member States and its people, proclaimed the ASEAN Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2011-2020) as the thematic years to promote disability inclusive development in ASEAN and to reaffirm ASEAN's commitment toward equal rights and opportunities of persons with disabilities in all spheres of ASEAN society. In line with disability related documents, particularly the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), fifteen major priority areas were set and aligned with each of the ASEAN's pillars, depicting that disability is a cross-cutting issue embedded in all of the work of the ASEAN Community. In respect of established sectoral bodies, mechanisms, and protocol, the Decade intent was to promote implementation of disability initiatives by utilizing those existing mechanisms and bodies in addition to welcoming other initiatives which enhance the overall quality of life development of person with disabilities in ASEAN. The Fundamental Principles of the Decade of the Mobilization Framework are:

- Respect in the identity and unique characteristics of ASEAN Community, particularly for established sectoral bodies, mechanisms, and protocol.
- Realization of disability as a cross-sectoral issue embedded within three pillars of the ASEAN Community: ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC).
- Encouragement for ASEAN Member States and ASEAN Secretariat to share the ownership of "the ASEAN Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2011-2020)"

and related initiatives to fully promote rights and equal opportunity of persons with disabilities at the national and regional level.

- Respect in the joint effort of multi-stakeholders, including persons with disabilities and their families, Disabled Persons Organizations (DPOs), CSOs, and international organizations, academic institutions, business sector, other related entities towards empowerment and quality of life development of persons with disabilities.
- Promotion of people-oriented mechanisms and policies and inclusion of persons with disabilities in the policy formulation process, including recognition of the ASEAN Disability Forum (ADF) as the voice from the disability community, providing the platform of action for mainstreaming disability perspectives in the ASEAN community.

In the declaration and framework, Priority Area 9 focuses specifically on children with disabilities action, including:

- Ensuring that children with disabilities are provided with disability and age appropriate programs/services;
- Ensuring that all actions concerning children with disabilities, in the best interests of children, will be a primary consideration;
- Ensuring inclusion of children with disabilities in ASEAN's existing programs/initiatives for children such as ASEAN Children's Forum (ACF) and address children with disabilities issues in ASEAN's related bodies

5.3 ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the recovery framework was developed at the 36th ASEAN Summit in June 2020. It serves as the main reference document for strategic direction, partnerships, areas of focus, and coordination of support for recovery for internal and external ASEAN stakeholders. Its members consider the framework to be a collective and long-term socioeconomic recovery strategy guided by key principles, a targeted approach, and a results-based plan. The guiding principles of the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF) are: 1) Focused by prioritizing broad strategies and key priorities that are most relevant to support ASEAN's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic; 2) Balanced between saving lives and livelihoods. Economic recovery should not come at the expense of public health, equity, security, and long-term sustainability; 3) Impactful strategies and priorities that will go beyond high-level statements and that deliver sustainable results and meet stakeholders' expectations; 4) Pragmatic by aligning with existing plans and leveraging existing ASEAN mechanisms, initiatives, cooperation programmes, and partners; 5) Inclusive in both the design and implementation of actions to decrease inequality, paying special attention to vulnerable groups and sectors, which are the worst affected by the pandemic. All segments of society should benefit, so no one is left behind in ASEAN recovery efforts; and 6) Measurable implementation of ACRF should be ensured, and progress monitored and periodically assessed.

5.4 Declaration on the Digital Transformation of the Education System in ASEAN

The Declaration on the Digital Transformation of the Education System in ASEAN includes the key focus on fostering digital literacy and developing transferable skills, promoting access to safe digital learning opportunities for all, engaging the private sector including in the provision of innovative digital learning solutions, and collaborating with stakeholders on open education resources and open access learning. The adoption and eventual implementation of the above-mentioned declaration will drive the comprehensive transformation of ASEAN Member States' education systems and contribute to increasing access and inclusiveness to quality education and enhance the resilience of ASEAN education systems to future pandemics, shocks, and disruptions.

Taking its foundations from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), ASEAN Community Vision 2025, and the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF), this report presents current practices of inclusive education in Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Viet Nam from ASEAN, and in China and Mongolia. The seven domains of inclusive education as described in UNICEF's Education for Every Ability (2020) anchor the country profiles. Students with disabilities not only can help the economy grow across ASEAN but also contribute to the diversity of work in the public and private sectors, and foster morale, creativity, and greater social cohesion.

6. Reviews of Policies and Responses Related to COVID-19 on Persons with Disabilities of Australia

6.1 The Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986

The Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986 establishes the Australian Human Rights Commission which is a government body overseeing the application of federal legislation in the areas of human rights, anti-discrimination, social justice and privacy. The Commission's website (<https://humanrights.gov.au>) also provides links and information on relevant disability and human rights conventions and standards. Since the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020, the Commission has provided advice directly to the federal government, various committees, and key organizations to ensure measures to combat COVID-19 protect peoples' human rights now and advance them in the recovery phase.⁹¹ The Commission has developed reports on COVID-19 human rights related issues, including:

- Management of Covid-19 risks in immigration detention (2021);
- Guideline on the rights of people with disabilities in health and disability care during COVID-19 (2020);
- Impacts of COVID-19 on children and young people who contact Kids Helpline.

⁹¹ Available at https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/commission-general/covid-19-information?_ga=2.128564044.1339008180.1680104714-460255665.1679915031, last visit on 29 March 2023.

The Guideline on the Rights of People with Disabilities in Health and Disability Care during COVID-19 (2020) provides practical guidance on how to apply a human rights-based approach to decision-making within the health system in the context of the current pandemic, that takes the rights of people with disability properly into account. Healthcare and disability support providers can use these Guidelines as the basis for developing publicly available medical and treatment protocols which uphold the human rights principles outlined.

6.2 Australian Government Preparedness and Responses to COVID-19

In order to prepare for and respond to COVID-19 and provide support to persons with disabilities, Australia established a Disability Taskforce immediately to bring together representatives from disabled people's organizations, disability advocacy and representative organizations, the disability service system, representatives from health and education, and other relevant stakeholders. Australia issued preparedness and response strategies to support people and children with disabilities, including providing for their immediate welfare by ensuring the continuity of support, both and via the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS); expanding existing national information services to manage requests related to COVID-19 from people with disabilities, particularly those who may not have access to the internet; and providing resources and establishing a proactive, phone-based outreach program to existing NDAP providers to enable advocates to connect and check in with people with disabilities. This program actively engaged with any other person with disabilities in the region that the NDAP provider operates; establishing a national prioritized delivery service for essential goods for people with disabilities such as sanitizing equipment, continence aids, and medical consumables (e.g. medical swabs, feeding support, catheters, wound dressings); actively liaising with states and territories to ensure full inclusion of people with disabilities in all plans to deal with COVID-19; providing equal access to essential goods, such as groceries and food; and ensuring that all information provided was available in plain English, Easy Read, and Auslan, and that departments liaised with disability organizations about vital communications before the information was sent out or posted to ensure that it was disability friendly and accessible.

The committee is also obligated to provide support by ensuring people with disabilities, both who contract COVID-19 and those who do not, are provided essential support and services from providers (especially accommodation providers) at all times, by providing additional financial support where needed. This was established through an emergency COVID-19 NDIS response to ensure that people with disabilities could more flexibly utilize their plans, to get information to people with disabilities, and to ensure continuity of support. Specifically, continuity of support for people with disabilities included the provisions for replacement of support workers at no financial penalty, planning to manage support provisions if a person with disabilities contracts COVID-19; planning to manage support provisions if disability support workers contract COVID-19, etc.

For the many people with disabilities not on the NDIS, the Australian government created a mainstream state/territory response team who are responsible for ensuring providers maintain capacity to continue the provision of services and support provision. Where appropriate, the

response team could facilitate support and referral pathways, information and resources from other government agencies, and expansion of Home and Community Care services by states and territories.

The committee also worked to provide employment and income support by providing accessible facilities for the many people with disabilities who needed to work from home to ensure equal access to work; ensuring people with disabilities who needed to self-isolate would not be discriminated against by their employers; ensuring access to special leave for people with disabilities who don't have COVID-19 but still need to self-isolate when they are not able to work from home and/or if they didn't have other leave provisions available to them; and suspended all in-person mutual obligation requirements on Newstart and other income support payments, such as the Disability Support Pension. People who were applying for income support payments because they were not able to work were entitled to timely review of their application.

Specifically for education, the committee allowed people with disabilities who were studying to access their course work from home, including flexible arrangements for accessing course material and assessments, no penalty for needed flexible arrangements, ensuring equal access to all school materials if students with disabilities were required to study from home, ensuring there were plans to support University and technical and further education (TAFE) students with disabilities in the case of shut downs, ensuring there was clear communication with families about what was happening including what to do about keeping children and young people with disabilities safe, and ensuring there were clear plans for families of children with disabilities if schools and early childhood services were shut down including making reasonable adjustments for children and students with disabilities if their education was to continue at home.

For children and young people with disabilities, the Australian government ensured flexibility in NDIS as NDIS plans often did not include support worker time and this was essential as children's services closed. They also established a plan for children and young people with disabilities that spans employment of families of children and young people with disabilities, NDIS, Health, Education, and that took an intersectional approach (CALD, First Nations, rural and remote issues etc.). They established a central coordinating taskforce specifically for children and young people with disabilities aged 0-25, in partnership with disability advocacy organisations, to oversee the response and established strong communications targeted at this cohort and tailored to their needs, in consultation with disability advocates. Actions included boosting funding for advocacy organisations that work with children and young people with disabilities, noting NDAP does not fund many organisations that provide specialist support for children and young people and that these are mainly funded by states and territories and were overwhelmed with demand, even before the crisis.

Specific to the deafblind community and heard of hearing community, the government took into account the communities' specific communications needs. Information needed to be in a range of formats, including Auslan, tactile interpreting, captioning, large print, braille, electronic, etc. and required messaging on all television media with closed captioning.

The Australian Government committed to ensuring that every student, including students with disabilities, have access to education in a sustainable and effective manner during the COVID-19 pandemic. Importantly, through the National Principles for School Education, all government and non-government schools, including special schools, were encouraged to continue to provide an on-campus option for those children who were not able to learn at home, including vulnerable children, children with disabilities, and the children of essential workers. Guidance for school leaders about how to do this, whilst minimizing the relatively low risk of transmission of COVID-19 in schools, was provided by the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee.

The decision on whether students who are medically vulnerable or have additional support needed attend school was recommended to be determined in consultation with the principal, the parent/caretaker, and the student's medical practitioner where appropriate. The Department of Health published the Return to School for Students with Disability COVID-19 Health Risk Management Plan to assist with this decision.

7. Findings: Impacts of COVID-19 on Students with Disabilities

According to the MoEYS, full statistics and data on people with disabilities are not readily available in Cambodia. For children with disabilities, access to school and the possibility of staying in school is far lower than for children without disabilities. According to the Education Management Information System (EMIS), in school year 2019/20, an estimated 891 preschool-aged children with disabilities enrolled in preschool, of which 377 were girls. Furthermore, 11,934 children with a disabilities enrolled in primary school, of which 4,906 were girls. Data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2018 on educational disparities linked to disability show that 73 percent of Cambodian 14 to 16-year-olds without a disability have completed primary education, compared to only 44 per cent of their peers with a disability. The study showed a large gap between children with and without disabilities, with a 50-percentage point difference between the out-of-school rate of disabled and non-disabled children (57 percent vs. 7 percent, respectively). This was also reflected in the adjusted disability parity index of 1.88, which means that children with disabilities are almost two times more likely to be out of school than their non-disabled peers in Cambodia. A blog post by the Global Partnership for Education summarized some of the challenges that children with disabilities faced during the pandemic. These include the observation that: remote learning tools are not always accessible to learners with disabilities or those with complex learning needs; limited internet hinders learning even further; and lack of additional support and care (such as therapy, related care services, education support, etc.) impacts children with disabilities.

Students with visual and auditory disabilities were impacted by the changes to their learning environment. All schools were closed after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and a few months later, online learning modes were introduced. The MoEYS introduced TV programs and video clips to assist students with learning. In addition, teachers were encouraged to produce short videos to send to students. The delivery modes of teaching or communication between the teachers and students were done via Facebook Messenger and Telegram. Teachers sent video clips and study

materials to students using the two apps. Based on the interviews with students, teachers, and the school management, these materials did not cater to the special needs of disabled students.

Instructions from the MoEYS during the school closures were very general. There were no specific instructions for dealing with students with disabilities. When asked to describe the situation at the National Institute for Special Education (NISE) during the Covid-19 outbreak, the director of NISE mentioned that there was no specific instruction for NISE; however, NISE followed the government's instructions for normal high schools such as social distancing and improving hygiene among students. He also added that all the staff members and trainers were required to wear masks all the time for protective measures.

There was very little support for students' living and learning. When asked if there was any support provided to help students learn during the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the teachers mentioned that during the pandemic, the MoEYS required that teaching and learning be conducted virtually and all the teachers were trained virtually on methodology for online teaching and how to motivate students to continue learning via online platform. However, most of the teachers accepted that the training was not enough to help them teach online effectively, especially on how to use online teaching platforms. One teacher claimed that there was no proper training on how to use the Zoom platform, and they had to figure out how to use it by themselves. She added that it was very challenging as most of the teachers were not familiar with the platform and there was no technical support within the school.

Another teacher mentioned that there were a few organizations that provided tablets and laptops for teachers and students to borrow. She added that one laptop/tablet was shared among two teachers. For students, if they did not have one, they had to make a request to the office. However, only the students living near the school were able to borrow from the office, while those living far away were not able to do so. One of the teachers claimed that those devices were quite old. She was worried that the device would be damaged and she would have to pay for such an old device.

Most of the teachers interviewed claimed that they need regular training on using various technology for teaching and learning and necessary devices. This would make them more prepared if they were to teach online again. A teacher claimed that ad hoc training would never be effective.

7.1 Impacts of COVID-19 on Students' Emotion and Wellbeing

Visually impaired students and hard of hearing students felt that it was harder for them to move during social distancing and restrictions. This also caused negative impacts on their physical and mental health.⁹² There were also noted differences between students with different types of disabilities.

⁹² See Abour-Nicitopoulos, et.al (2022). Movement Behaviour and health of children and youth with disabilities: Impact of 2020 COVID-19 pandemic

Social distancing made it very challenging for visually impaired students as they need certain services for their movement. During the COVID-19 restrictions, students with visual impairment found it extremely difficult to navigate.

“As touching is almost the only way for me to move and feel things, when the government imposed social distancing measure, I found it very difficult to navigate around and perform daily necessities.” Said a blind teacher trainee at the NISE.

Hard of hearing students also found it difficult to navigate to work or to get necessities. Because communication required sign language, hard of hearing students/teacher trainees felt that it was harder to move around for them than for normal people.

“Even though I could see, it was so difficult to get food. I was restricted from moving. I was trying to explain to the authorities about my purpose of travel, but they did not understand my sign language. They did not allow me to pass.” Said a deaf teacher trainee at the NISE.

Children are not indifferent to the significant psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. They experience fear, uncertainties, substantial changes to their routines, physical and social isolation, alongside high levels of parental stress.⁹³ Social distancing or social isolation has led to a lack of daily routine and structure. Maintaining a routine induces a sense of discipline as well as safety in children, which is important for their psychological and emotional development. Adjusting routines, like, experiencing closure of schools and day care centers, social distancing and/or confinement to home, can prove to be a real struggle for children with physical and mental disabilities.⁹⁴ The findings from the interviews with students from special education high schools found that both visually and auditory impaired students were found to have been emotionally affected from the school closures and the COVID-19 pandemic. When the students were asked to stay at home and adhere to social distancing, they got bored as they missed their friends, their activities, and their teachers. For some students with hearing difficulties, their family members were not able to communicate using sign language so this increased their isolation.

“I was extremely bored when I had to stay at home as I miss my friends at school where we could communicate with each other. At home I felt I was being left behind as my family members did not pay attention to me. They cannot use sign language,” Said a deaf student at Battambang High School for Special Education.

In addition, because of their limited understanding of the event, both visually impaired students and students with hearing difficulties experienced worry and stress. When asked about the difficulties they experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic, the students claimed that they were afraid of getting infected and they were scared of contacting other people or their friends.

⁹³ See Imran, et al., 2020

⁹⁴ See Bartlett et al., 2020

“During COVID-19, I was so worried that I would be infected by the virus as I could not see anything besides being told by other people about the situation,” said a visually impaired teacher trainee at NISE.

Moreover, special education schools offer accommodation and food to students from remote areas and students who need support. Schools provided three meals per day to students staying in school and one meal to those not staying in school. Learning from home means their family had to take care of their meals, which is quite a constraint for the poorer families. One of the students mentioned that “I prefer to learn at school because my family is poor, and I do not have enough food to eat.” Some other students became depressed as the learning environment at home is less fun than that at school. One student stated that “I was so stressed when learning online and I wanted to return to school so that I can see my friends.”

Experiencing negative emotions, changes in moods, and changes in the sleeping and eating patterns of children put them at a greater risk of experiencing relapse of mental illness as well as exacerbating existing mental health issues. The pandemic also exacerbated the emotional wellbeing needs of students facing multiple disabilities.

“Some students have multiple disabilities, for example, deafness and low level of intelligence. Those students have even been more severely impacted by the school closures as they require special attention from the school.” Said a school principal at one of the five Special Education High Schools.

When asked about the situation after resuming physical classes, most trainees claimed they were still worried about the physical interaction as they could get infected. One trainee said “I was afraid of getting infected with COVID-19 as I would not be able to cover the treatment cost.”

Trainees reported that they needed to earn income to support themselves or their family. During the lockdowns and restrictions, since they were restricted from travelling, they struggled financially and with added stress.

“I needed to work to support my wife and kids, but I was not allowed to travel, I was struggling so much since there was no income to support my family,” said a male trainee at the NISE.

7.2 Impacts of COVID-19 on Student’s Learning

One significant impact of COVID-19 has been the shift to online learning. Assistive technology does help students with disabilities to learn. Across Cambodia, during the school closure, learning and teaching was moved online. Both types of students with disabilities’ learning have been impacted severely as each type of disability required a specific method or specific assistive technology. However, the pandemic came unexpectedly, which meant that both teachers and students were not ready to shift entirely online. Students with disabilities felt the impact of challenges in online learning more than students without disabilities.

Limited knowledge and availability of assistive technology

Assistive technology has been used for online teaching for students with and without disabilities. One of the prevailing challenges teachers and specialists face is the lack of skills and knowledge on the utilization of assistive technology which affects use. The individualized education program (IEP) team needs to determine the individual needs of the students for support using technology services to select the best assistive technologies that can be adapted to ensure student learning even through virtual means.⁹⁵ Appropriate assistive technology can facilitate and maximize the educational opportunities for their performance (Alnahdi, 2014) amid the pandemic.⁹⁶ The teachers and parents themselves need to be trained in using the assistive technologies during home quarantine or even after the pandemic so that the students can continue learning using the existing technologies available to them. Likewise, suggested technologies assist students with disabilities and include word processors, proofreading programs, spell-checking programs, speech recognition, speech synthesis, optical character recognition system, talking calculators, Free-Form Databases, etc.⁹⁷

However, in the case of Cambodia, because of the lack of preparation as the pandemic was unexpected not just for Cambodia but also in other countries, both teachers and students were not ready to use the assistive technology. Due to limited technical skills and knowledge and limited availability of this technology, both teachers and students found that using these assistive technologies was extremely challenging. Visually impaired students benefited from Google to help read text, but this assistive technology works with the English text. For Khmer text, it does not work smoothly. Technological literacy amongst parents and caretakers is also very low, so it is difficult for them to help their children learn.

“I can use Google to help translate texts into voices. It helps a lot with my learning, but it only works well for English texts. For Khmer texts, it does not work well,” said a hard of hearing student at Kampong Cham Special High School.

Online teaching and learning required much more effort from both the teachers and students. Teachers were unprepared for the transition to online learning. They also lacked technical knowledge or experience with online teaching platforms and were not provided with any training even after the school closure. Facebook Messenger was the common platform they could use for communication and teaching students. Teachers worked together to produce videos and soundtracks for the students. One of the teachers said, “We were not prepared for such a situation, and we did not have much knowledge with online teaching. We were not provided any training, but our colleague had knowledge in the internet technology, and he helped us with making videos.”

However, the teachers accepted that online teaching is not as effective as teaching in the classroom and as one teacher said “It requires interaction and touching to make students with vision

⁹⁵ See Mahmoud, 2018

⁹⁶ See Alnahdi, 2014

⁹⁷ Raskind, 1994

impairment learn, but it cannot be done online. Subjects related to sciences are most difficult to teach online.” To the students, online learning requires quite good assistance from their family members, which is challenging for many students.

“At the beginning, we started to learn how to use Google classroom, Zoom, Telegram, and Messenger to teach students. Because we were new to those things, it took us time to learn to use it,” said a teacher at a High School for Special Education in Phnom Penh.

In order to assist students to learn during the pandemic, the MoEYS and development partners recorded videos. However, the videos were recorded for students in general, without special attention to students with disabilities except for sign language translation. Students with vision impairments claimed that even with the recorded videos, they could not really see what was inside the video because things in the videos were too small. In addition, students with hearing difficulties also found that it is very hard for them to understand the contents even with sign language translation as they were not able to follow the contents and the translation at the same time well. In the physical classrooms, hard of hearing students were able to ask for clarification or further explanation.

“My parents were very busy with making income, so they could not help me much with my learning. When I had questions, I sent a voice message to my teacher, but sometimes she could respond quickly and sometimes it took a while for her to respond,” said a visually impaired student from Battambang Special Education High School.

Students with vision impairment depend quite heavily on physical contact to learn specific subjects such as mathematics, physics, and chemistry; however, such elements were missing in online learning, as a student emphasized: ‘It was hard for me to learn mathematics, physics, and chemistry online as I could not visualize what my teacher described to me; however, in the classroom my teacher allowed me to touch things which helps me understand them better.’ Even those with low vision had difficulties learning online because the contents in the video were not large enough for them to view. Moreover, it was difficult for students to concentrate at home. One of the students mentioned that “It was a bit noisy at home, making me losing focus on my learning,” and some others also claimed that they were asked to help with various types of housework.

Lack of Smart Devices and Internet Connection

Access to smart devices and the internet was very limited for students. For instance, one of the students mentioned that “I was not able to study online because my parents could not afford to buy a smart phone for me,” while two other students stated that “I had a smart phone, but I lived far from the town, so the internet connection was very bad which was not convenient for online learning.” One of the students also complained about spending money on internet, “I needed to spend at least \$4 a month on internet so that I could learn online,” and another noted, “There was a time when my parents were so busy that they did not have time to refill the phone balance and I was not able to learn for almost a week.” In order to assist students with financial difficulty, some

schools provided certain financial support (\$1 per week) to students to refill their phone balance. “We used budget allocated for buying equipment to help our students. We gave them \$1 a week to refill their phone balance,” a school principal. Some devices were made available to students, but the availability of the devices was very limited compared to the demand. Some of the devices were also of low quality. A few students with low vision managed to get paid jobs and abandoned online learning. After school resumed, they did not want to return to school as they were happy with the money earned from their job.

In addition to lack of smart devices and internet costs, lack of reliable internet made it difficult for students to attend online classes. For example, when Battambang Special Education High School and Siem Reap Special Education High School were required to close temporarily during the COVID-19 outbreak, management noted that less than 50 percent of the students were able to do online learning due to the lack of internet connection and smart devices.

“We called their parents to show them and the students about how to learn via online platforms, but only less than 50 percent of the students were able to do online learning because they do not have a smart phone or though they have one, the internet connection was very bad because they live quite far away from the city,” said the school management of Siem Reap Special Education High School.

Effectiveness of Teaching and Learning Online

The effectiveness of online teaching has been questioned due to the compounding factors already noted. In terms of teaching and learning, a school director mentioned that all learning and teaching was turned online and, yet he believed it was not really effective as many trainers did not have stable internet and limited knowledge of online platform for teaching. He added that there was no special training for the teachers to improve their capacity in online teaching due to Covid-19 restrictions and social distancing measures. He also claimed that the teaching approaches commonly used before the pandemic by trainers were not effective at all when applied to online teaching. He added many activities such as teamwork or group discussions were not used, making the online teaching quite boring and less interactive. Moreover, the teaching pace was very slow compared to physical teaching and thus many lessons were not covered. The teachers were also unable to control the students’ attendance. Moreover, he added that some teachers complained about the extra cost of the internet for teaching as there was no budget support to cover this. A one-time \$6 budget for phone cards was supplied, but this was for training workshop organized by UNICEF only. In addition, the common tools used by trainers were Zoom and Google Forms, which requires more effort.

“The teaching and learning were not effective. Most teachers complained to me about online teaching as it was not effective, and they needed to double their effort. Some teachers had to return to their hometown in the province where there was little internet coverage. The trainees needed to use Android apps to read the text on the screen to help them learn, yet the app worked well with only English language, not Khmer language,” said one of the management team members at the NISE.

When asked to describe their challenges and concerns during the Covid-19 outbreak, the teacher trainees expressed several frustrations. Most trainees complained that they had to work from home due to lockdowns. They were required to use Zoom and other online platforms for working and teaching; however, it was very inconvenient because sign language requires interaction to make communications more effective, but such interactions are impossible with online teaching and learning. One of the trainees stated that the “internet wasn’t really good. I needed to wait until the internet was good so that I can work or teach. I had to work any time of the day depending on the stability of the internet.” Another trainee said, “I was not able to communicate with my students properly due to the internet connection.”

Students also struggled with online learning. One of the students stated that ‘I did not understand much from the lesson videos sent by my teachers. Even though there is sign language interpretation in the video, I could not understand much, and my parents did not really help me with the lesson.’ Most of the students reported wanting to return to school. They stated that they had no one to talk to at home as their family members did not know sign language. Some were not able to understand what other members of their family were talking about, making them feel alone and ignored. One student claimed that living in the house was just like living in the prison.

A few students claimed that they enjoyed learning online, but the internet connection was not stable, creating difficulties for them to learn. Most students mentioned that they did not have any computers and that smartphones were the only device they used for learning. Most students complained that they did not really know how to use applications for learning. A few students complained about not having enough food to eat due to poverty; however, some claimed that they had money, but they were not able to go out and buy food due to restrictions. Some students did not have many things to do at home, while some had to help with various household chores and their parents’ business.

When asked to compare learning in a normal public school, many of the interviewed students complained that it was difficult due the large number of students in the class. Also, the teacher did not use sign language. A student added that there was no communication with other students or teachers. Many mentioned that they had friends in the class, but they were not willing to help them as they were also focusing on the lesson as well.

7.3 Impacts of COVID-19 on Parental Selective Behavior

Limited financial resources for buying smart devices and paying internet fees, combined with parental stress was noted to affect parental decision making in regards to their children. Some parents were noted to favor children without disabilities in education. This case could be found in the study.

“I have several siblings, and in my family, we do not have smart phones for all. My parents would give the smart phones to my siblings who are not disabled,” said a student at Battambang Special Education High School.

The director of the NISE also stated that online teaching puts a lot of pressure on parents as the teachers required parents to provide extra care for their children and help them learn virtually. When asked about the situation after resuming physical classes, the director mentioned that though physical classes have been resumed, some online tools are still used for teaching; for example, Telegram is still being used by the teacher to distribute documents and assignments for their trainees.

The teachers also claimed that it was difficult to make students concentrate on the lessons. One stated that “I couldn’t assess their understanding.” Some also complained that since they had to work from home, they also needed to take care of their own children, which distracted them from working with the students. One of the trainees mentioned that she had students with specialized needs that could not be met. These students learn better with pictures, but this could not be done effectively through online learning. The teacher added that students’ parents complained that their children’s behavior was getting worse after they were required to learn from home.

Most teachers claimed that they requested their students to learn using video materials produced by the MoEYS in which sign language interpretation was included. However, they felt that such methods were not as effective as interactions with students. One of the teachers stated that students needed special support from the teachers. Only with the help of the teachers in the physical classroom can the students learn well. The majority of the teachers claimed that not many students attended Zoom lessons and it was really hard to know if the students were really focusing on the teaching. The teachers added that sometimes they requested the students’ parents to assist their children while learning via zoom and to make sure that the students were focusing on the online teaching.

When asked how their students felt about online learning, all the teachers claimed that their students complained about learning online. They stated that their students were very stressed when learning from home as they were not able to meet their friends and they would be very happy to return to school. However, teachers also noted that other factors impacted students’ ability to learn, such as getting jobs. One teacher mentioned that a few parents did not want their children to return to school as they needed them to help them with their business and housework as they believed that there was no use for their children to get educated since they were blind or deaf.

When asked what kind of support both the teachers and students need to prepare for future crises, some students noted that they needed special attention and assistance from their parents or family members to help them learn virtually. Many also requested the support of smart devices to learn online as their parents could not afford one for each child especially when they have multiple children learning at the same time. Those with low vision stated that they needed a proper place to learn because there was not enough light at home.

Teachers noted that they needed a platform designed specifically for teaching students with vision impairment, as one of them mentioned “We needed to use a few different apps to teach our students and it was very inconvenient. There should be one single platform that we can use especially for our students.” The teachers also claimed that it could be good to have textbooks for students with

low vision because the current textbooks are not convenient for them and they need magnifiers to help them read.

7.4 COVID-19 Impacts and Inclusive Classrooms

Inclusive education recognizes the right of every child and young person – without exception – to be included in general education settings. It involves adapting the environment and teaching approaches to ensure genuine and valued full participation of all children and young people. Besides challenges related to COVID-19, students with vision impairment also claimed to have faced a few other challenges. Students at special education high schools are required to study one shift at public school. As the teachers at public school need to cover a lot of lessons and there are a lot of students in the class, most teachers seem to pay little attention to the students with vision impairment. Students also accepted that they sometimes lost motivation to study at public school, but they did not have a choice.

Regarding inclusive education for students with disabilities, the director stated that students with disabilities had faced numerous challenges in a normal classroom even before the COVID-19 outbreak. Most of them could not catch up with the rest of the class and were not given enough attention. For hard of hearing students, they need to have sign language interpreters to help them understand the lessons better; however, this would require many interpreters. For visually impaired students, they found it difficult to understand when the teacher used demonstrative pronouns such as ‘this/that’ to explain since they could not visualize what the teacher was referring to. When asked to describe their students’ learning at normal schools, they claimed that there was no inclusiveness at normal public schools. They added that the teachers at public schools did not know sign language. Most of the teachers believed that it could be good to have sign language interpreters in each class at normal public schools.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study was focused on only two types of disabilities – students with auditory and visual impairments. Visually impaired and hard of hearing students were emotionally impacted by the COVID-19 due to fear and communication constraints. Students from disadvantaged families who required food assistance and accommodation were even more severely impacted. Online learning impacted these students ability to receive quality education as a lack of assistive technology, lack of skills and knowledge on using the technology, lack of family and community support, and lack of finances all impacted their ability to learn.

Recommendations to support students with disabilities during the pandemic

Emotional support:

During the pandemic and restrictions, persons with disabilities felt worried and fearful due to lack of support and information. Parents and members of the families should try to support persons with disabilities, so that they feel secure. Family members should spend more time talking with them,

making sure that they are not left behind. Parents and communities should learn sign languages to communicate with hard of hearing students.

Educational support:

For effective learning for students with disabilities, several areas should be addressed:

- Learning Pods (Correa-Torres and Muthukumaran, 2022): A learning pod is a small group of children who come together to learn and socialize. The learning pod was used for students who did not have Internet access or did not have adult support at home. These students were still doing remote learning, but they were supported by educational assistants, itinerant teachers, therapists, and other professionals to access their remote learning environments. Such Pods were easier to provide services for younger students and tactile learners in their caseload as compared to being completely remote.
- Reducing content delivery and adjusting instructional methods (Alshawabkeh, Woolsey and Kharbat, 2021): Content delivery is one of the factors that determines deaf students' success in education using online distance learning. Trying to cover a large volume of content like in a physical setting minimizes important interactive activities for students. At the same time, instructional methods should be adapted to the new setting; for example, integrating a visual discussion session, video presentation, infographic content, and pop-up polls within the lecture will diversify opportunities to reach students. It is also important to consider new forms of assessments and how they may be adapted to online distance learning.
- Formal training for the students with an interpreter on the use of the online platform prior to the first class (Alshawabkeh, Woolsey, and Kharbat, 2021): Students had difficulty catching up with the teaching, as only the teacher's slide was pinned on the screen and the interpreter appeared on a small frame at the corner of the screen. Therefore, it is important that the instructors, the interpreter, and the content can all be seen simultaneously.
- Providing necessary high-quality equipment and technology and improving accessibility and usage of learning materials. Many institutions have digitized their content; however, it is still inaccessible due to a lack of captioning and unclear audio, among other issues.
- Improve collaboration and partnership. The proposed solutions indicate the important role played by the government, teachers, parents, and specialists in improving education outcomes for students with disabilities.

9. Case Study: Australian Successful School Intervention

The Important of Social Supports for Student with Disabilities in Australia

Extracted from Smith, et al, (2022): Successful School Interventions for Students with Disability During Covid-19: Empirical Evidence from Australia. Asia-Pacific Edu Ref

Australia represents a successful case for interventions for students with disabilities during COVID-19. During the pandemic, the government issued the following interventions:

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, Australian health authorities and state and federal governments responded to the propagation of the infection by recommending people reduce their face-to-face interactions. This quickly turned into mandatory lockdowns of economic activities and school closures after the first few deaths. School shutdowns were implemented in all states by late March 2020 and remained closed in most states until May. School holidays were brought forward and extended while remote learning platforms were adopted. Although some schools remained opened for some children, including some special schools and classes for the children of workers considered ‘essential’ during the pandemic (e.g., nurses, doctors and some transport and shop workers), the disruption to schooling (and parents), was widespread.

Furthermore, the transformation of schooling into a set of learning activities that predominantly took place online had dramatic consequences for households’ wellbeing: parents, often ‘temporarily suspended’ from work or even laid off due the sharp downward trend in economic activity, suddenly found themselves juggling the demands of finding or maintaining an income and those of parenting children engaged in remote learning. Unsurprisingly, parents reported rapidly worsening mental health conditions as a product of these significant pressures. Lockdowns and restricted access to on-campus learning continues to be the lived experience of many Australian young people.

Social support: social support is a protective factor for the mental health and wellbeing of young people with intellectual disability and is a key consideration when supporting people in remote teaching and learning. Social distancing, school closures and learning online have disrupted the educational lives of these students and their families. To mitigate these disruptions, social support is the form of support that is most valued by the students with disabilities and families. Learning and engagement that take place via social activities and with social support are most likely to have relevant effects on learning and engagement during this prolonged period of disruption. Children and young people with disability, already coping with discrimination and social exclusion before the pandemic, felt and are feeling the impact of COVID-19 quite severely, especially when schools had to close and online learning activities were often the only option left to continue schooling. As the crisis has continued, and chronic uncertainty, multiple disruptions, remote learning and social isolation has been the experience of many young people,

the adverse effects on mental health are likely to become more prevalent. Being cut off from peers and teachers removed a fundamental channel through which children and young adults with disabilities grow as students and individuals. The concerns are identified more broadly in research identifying structural inequalities within many of the services and resources for people with disabilities. Attention to providing social support and opportunities for social activity with social-emotional support and instruction during synchronous online instruction can provide inclusion opportunities.

These supports can include developing supported social emotional skills to seek help in coping with anxiety (following Khodadadi et al., 2017), addressing some of the social isolation by securing ongoing and further relationships with teachers and peers. Disruptions to the routines of social activity and support that help young people, especially young people with disabilities thrive (Gilmore et al., 2016) can be further addressed with social supports. They promote self-efficacy and self-determining choices (ColonCabrera et al., 2021) reinforcing the communication of support needs for academic support and improving feedback loops between educators and students (Campbell & Gilmore, 2014; Hood, 2020).

According to Smith (2022), the result that social support was the single most important form of support positively associated with all aspects of perceived learning outcomes covered in the CYDA survey, while reducing feelings of isolation, is a clear indication of what schools could do to engage children and young adults with disability in remote learning, and where to direct financial resources. Scaffolds and supports for peer relationships between all students will benefit all students. Interactive activities, such as collaborative learning activities online, opportunities to participate in social-emotional learning in group communication and collaboration were among those strategies identified as effective. Explicit attention to skills in building and maintaining relationships are likely to support and maintain social networks (Page et al., 2021; Drane et al., 2021) can help to develop coping skills and opportunities for peer to peer and teacher to student understanding (Cavioni et al., 2017). Connecting the experiences of learning to home and taking time to assess the challenges and strategies that students used to cope and engage with their learning in different environments will assist in skill and empathy building (following Espelage et al., 2015; Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018; Khodadadi et al., 2017; Masi et al., 2021). Connecting with young people and their families to inform schools and teachers about what works, what might work better, and what has been learned from the experiences of remote learning, particularly around social support, will further allow this work to be done with dignity, informed by the knowledge and understanding of the young person's experience (Children and Young People with Disability [CYDA], 2020; Colon-Cabrera et al., 2021).

In Australia, the importance of social support may be also at the core of why non-government schools seem to have been more effective in their support relative to government schools, in that they may cater for a more homogeneous group of students, whose needs were easier to organize. It is also possible that non-government schools have more resources to support

students with disability, or, alternatively, that families of students with disability attending non-government schools are richer or better resourced to support their children's education.

Turning to the insights from families and young people, building skills in the use of technology and computers including how to log in, manage apps and practice communication in different digital mediums for young people needs more attention, as does the communication around support strategies between school and home.

Importantly, attention to professional development for teachers preparing them to support and inform the learning of young people with disability in digital and in-person teaching, drawing on the experiences of isolation reported during remote learning, would further support progress in providing inclusive learning experiences.

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4. UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities, adopted on 03 July 2009.

Appendixes

Appendix 1: Questionnaires

Questionnaires for NISE

1. What are laws related to the rights of persons with the disabilities in particular rights to education?
2. What are policies related to the rights of persons with the disabilities in particular rights to education?
3. How did you give exam and monitor trainees' learning? Please explain?
4. Among those laws and policies, are there any responses to support people with disabilities related rights of education during COVID-19?
5. If yes, how are they implemented. If no, what are the responses taken by your institution? Please elaborate.
6. Can you share your good practices in supporting people with disabilities during COVID-19 from your institution as well as from what you have known from other places or countries?
7. As DPs/or Development Agencies, do you have any flexibility policies to support people with disabilities, in relation to rights to education?
8. What are the challenges people with disabilities faced by people with disabilities during COVID-19 in particularly related to rights to education?
9. Among males, females, age groups, and standard of living, who are severely impacted by COVID-19 in particularly related to rights to education?
10. What are your recommendations or suggestions to the government in order to tackle the impacts on the persons with disabilities for the future pandemic?

Questions for trainers of trainees with disabilities

1. Are there training programs for trainers to teach students during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Are there any platform or methodology to teach students during COVID-19? Have you applied the same or different methods from pre-COVID-19? Please explain?
3. If no, what is guidance or instruction provided to the trainers?
4. How effective is the training during COVID-19? Please explain.
5. What are the challenges in teaching the trainees during the COVID-19?
6. What are the challenges of trainees' learning during COVID-19?
7. How have the trainees been impacted by COVID-19 in terms of their learning? Please explain.
8. What have you done to assist trainees to learn during COVID-19?
9. Are there any comments or suggestions to improve learning for people with disabilities for the future pandemic?

Questions for trainees/students with disabilities

1. Could you please tell me about the challenges you faced during COVID-19?
2. How did you enroll at your school or institute during COVID-19?
3. How were exams given during the COVID-19? If the exams were provided online, how effective were they? Please explain?
4. Did you feel that you would drop out of the class due to COVID-19? Please explain.
5. How helpful were your trainers/teachers and parents in helping you learn during the COVID-19 pandemic?
6. Could you please tell me about the challenges you faced in learning?
7. How did you learn during the COVID-19?
8. Did you like or dislike learning via online platform, if provided? Please explain.
9. If you learned via online platform, which mode is more convenient between online and physical modes?
10. If you learned via online platform, how effective was it? Please explain.
11. What supports did you need during the COVID-19 pandemic? Please explain.
12. Do you have any suggestions recommendations to help students with disabilities learn better for future pandemic?

Questions for parents

1. How did you see your child situation during COVID-19?
2. What burden did you face in helping your child to learn during COVID-19 pandemic?
3. Did you see your child perform better or worse during COVID-19 pandemic? Please explain?
4. How much did your child learn during COVID-19 compared with pre-COVID-19? Please explain.
5. What support would you so that your child could learn more during COVID-19?

6. What are your suggestions to improve student with disabilities education for the future pandemic?

Appendix 2: Statistic of student with disabilities and 5 classes for special Education Academic Year 2021-2022

No	Level	Blind		N.Class	Deaf		N.Class s	Total		N.Class
		Total	Female		Total	Female		Total	Female	
1	Low									
	Medium									
	High				12	5	1	12	5	1
Total					12	5	1	12	5	1
2	Grade 1	32	13	6	111	47	7	143	70	13
	Grade 2	17	6	4	62	29	5	79	35	9
	Grade 3	15	8	4	84	25	6	99	51	10
	Grade 4	15	8	4	67	25	6	82	33	10
	Grade 5	5	1	2	51	19	6	56	20	8
	Grade 6	15	4	3	49	19	6	64	23	9
Total		99	40	23	424	182	36	523	232	59
3	Grade 7	15	7	3	40	19	5	55	26	8
	Grade 8	19	4	4	39	17	5	58	21	9
	Grade 9	16	3	4	32	10	5	48	13	9
Total		50	14	11	111	46	15	161	60	26

4	Grade 10	16	8	4	24	8	4	40	16	8
	Grade 11	6	3	2	14	5	4	20	8	5
	Grade 12	9	6	2	13	8	4	22	14	6
Total		31	17	8	51	21	12	82	38	19

Cambodia's Country Report on Assistance Measures for Graduating Least Developed Countries (LDCs)

Dr. PHIM Runsinarith *

1. Introduction

Sixteen least developed countries (LDCs) are at various stages of leaving the LDC category in the coming years. Only six have left the category in the 50 years since it was formed. Many of these new actual and potential graduates are concerned about losing access to the international support measures (ISMs) provided by the international community. After graduation, in some cases after a transition period, countries stand to forego access to specific international support measures in trade, a few specific sources of official development assistance and other areas such as travel support and reduced budgetary contributions to the UN. While DESA impact assessments normally find these effects to be rather limited and manageable, the loss of these benefits and perceived impacts discourages some graduating LDCs from leaving the category. LDC graduation and assistance for LDCs are mentioned in 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' over 40 times, particularly with a view to 'leaving no-one behind'. Support for LDCs after they leave the category is an important way of helping these countries meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

This paper relates to the project on "New assistance measures for graduating Belt and Road Least Developed Countries towards the achievement of Agenda 2030" financed by the UN Peace and Development Fund, Agenda 2030 Sub-Fund. The project is working with the governments of Bangladesh, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Nepal and Timor-Leste, as well as international specialists and UN entities, to develop a set of proposals for post-graduation assistance. Some of these will be specific to the country concerned, and some generic – ie. applicable across the board. The proposals partly aim at mitigating the potential impact of forfeiting existing ISMs – such as the eventual loss of duty-free, quota-free market access under the European Everything But Arms (EBA) Initiative – and will partly take the form of fresh measures to assist with the new development landscape following graduation, such as new infrastructure investment to support trade diversification.

The project aims to develop a concrete set of new proposed assistance mechanisms tailored to each country for the post-graduation landscape. Communications and advocacy measures built into the project will aim at incorporating these mechanisms into international processes such as the forthcoming new Programme of Action for LDCs to be launched in 2022, and ideally some of the measures will be adopted by donors and trading partners and incorporated into government

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planning. Secondly, beyond the development and publicity of these measures, the project aims to strengthen policy frameworks and institutions for the adoption and use of selected assistance mechanisms in target countries.

Cambodia met the criteria for LDC graduation for the first time at the Committee for Development Policy (CDP) triennial review in 2021, meeting all three thresholds for graduation: per-capita gross national income (GNI), the human assets index and the economic and environmental vulnerability index. If it continues meeting the thresholds for graduation at the next triennial review in 2024, it will be considered for possible graduation from the category. In the meantime, while Cambodia remains an LDC based on the UN definition, it has already become a lower middle-income (LMI) economy according to the World Bank classification.

Cambodia's rapid economic growth is underpinned by sectors such as manufacturing and tourism, with exports a mainstay of the economy. Agriculture, a large share of which is rice farming, accounts for a declining share of GDP, currently about 22%. China accounts for the largest share of foreign direct investment (FDI) and tourism arrivals, whereas the United States and European Union are important destinations for export products such as garments, footwear, luggage and bicycles. Cambodia is a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Free Trade Area and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

This paper aims to support preparations by the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) for graduation and identification of important areas of support in achieving sustainable production transformation and development. At the intergovernmental level, this work will serve as an important source of information for CDP and other processes. At the national level, it will support national stakeholders leading or participating in different aspects of the graduation process, especially preparation of the country's smooth transition strategy.

The paper is divided into five sections. Section 2 discusses Cambodia's readiness with regards to LDC graduation and identifies the main stakeholders in the Government, development and trading partners, and other entities that would be important to lead or participate in the smooth transition process, and/or need to be consulted in identifying transition measures. Section 3 discusses the results from interviews with key stakeholders identified in Section 2 on existing support measures which are most helpful and which therefore might be extended after graduation; what are the key challenges likely after graduation; and what might be the best ways of mitigating those challenges and providing assistance after graduation. Section 4 summarizes findings of other existing documents and information relevant to identification of specific support measures for LDC graduation. Section 5 provides recommendations on the existing or new support measures of greatest interest and importance to the country, based on the results of the survey and document review.

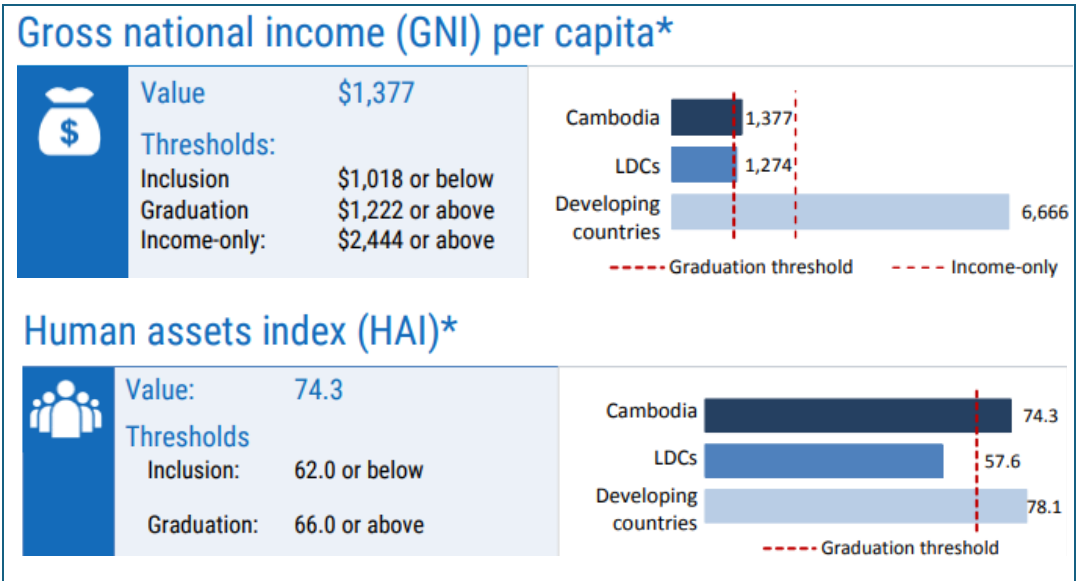
2. Preparations for Graduation/Stakeholder Review

2.1 Preparations for Graduation

In order to graduate from LDC status, a country must meet at least two of three given thresholds or the income-only criteria (double the GNI per capita threshold) during two successive reviews of the UN Committee for Development Policy (CDP). Graduation is not automatic, however, as CDP also takes into account a set of supplementary indicators and other information on the sustainability of a country’s development progress. A CDP recommendation that a country graduate must then be endorsed by the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the General Assembly.

Cambodia met the established thresholds for graduation for the first time at the CDP triennial review in 2021, meeting not only two but all three established thresholds for graduation. Cambodia’s per-capita GNI of US\$ 1,377 (based on the 2017-2019 average) was well above the graduation threshold of US\$ 1,222. Cambodia’s performance on the Human Assets Index (HAI), a set of health and education indicators was 74.3, also well above the graduation threshold of 66. Finally, Cambodia’s score on the Economic and Environmental Vulnerability Index (EVI) in 2021 was 30.6, marginally below the graduation threshold of 32.

Figure 1: GNI, HAI and EVI in 2021



Economic and environmental vulnerability index (EVI)*



Source: https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/LDC_Profile_Cambodia.pdf

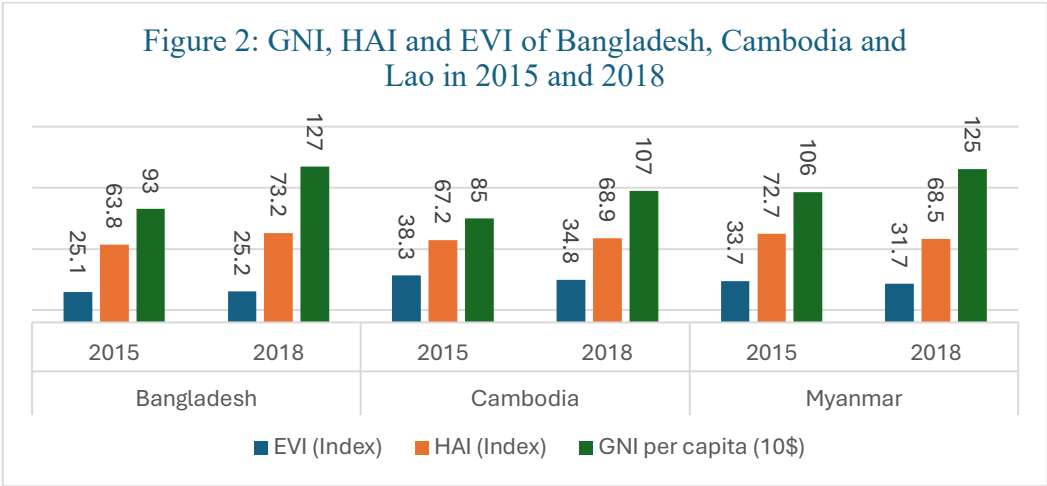
2021 is the first triennial review at which Cambodia has met the overall graduation threshold. If it continues to meet the threshold for graduation in 2024, CDP will consider whether to recommend it for graduation, a recommendation that would need to be endorsed by ECOSOC and the General Assembly. If so, Cambodia would enter a minimum 3-year preparatory period and could still enjoy the LDC-specific trade preferences and derogations until at least 2027, with some LDC-specific measures offering extended transition periods beyond that date.

However, there is also a precedence for potential delay of graduation due to the COVID-19 crisis and the Committee's decision on the readiness of the country. First, because of the pandemic, Cambodia's economy in 2020 contracted by 3.4 percent, which is the slowest ever (Ministry of Economy and Finance 2021). Although growth was strong many years before 2020, the outbreak caused sharp decelerations in most of Cambodia's main engines of growth in 2020, including weakened tourism (and hospitality) and construction activity and, more recently, the export sector. This will have a profound impact on both economic and social sectors. Second, from the experiences of other countries in the past, the CDP will not conduct assessment on Cambodia's graduation based on CDP indices alone but will also consider additional information including a set of supplementary indicators.⁹⁸ For instance, Timor-Leste has been eligible for graduation based on the defined thresholds at the 2015, 2018 and 2021 triennial reviews but has nevertheless not yet been recommended for graduation by CDP, mainly because concerns remain about whether Timor-Leste is sustainably above the CDP graduation thresholds for GNI (because of the country's declining revenue from oil and gas, on which the economy is heavily dependent) and HAI (taking into account the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic), and with the country also not meeting the EVI threshold.

⁹⁸ At its 2020 Plenary, CDP decided to introduce a set of supplementary graduation indicators into the graduation framework. They complement the official CDP graduation criteria and other country-specific information such as the DESA impact assessments, and aim among other things to (1) provide an additional screening tool to identify country-specific vulnerabilities, priorities and support needs; (2) assist countries in preparing for smooth transition; (3) enhance the monitoring of graduating and graduated countries; and (4) further align the LDC graduation framework with the Sustainable Development Goals. The list of supplementary indicators will continue to be updated and in 2021 covered issues such as external debt, current account, voice and accountability (World Bank), and a women's empowerment index.

The UN General Assembly has recommended that LDC graduation be based on a national smooth transition strategy elaborated by each graduating country with the support of the international community. It also invited graduating countries to implement the smooth transition strategy as part of their overall development strategy.

As Cambodia has only recently met the CDP graduation threshold for the first time, UN analysis on the probable impacts of graduation has yet to be prepared. In other Asian graduating countries such as Bangladesh, Lao PDR and Nepal, trade access, especially to the EU, is one of the main changes that requires attention from policymakers. This issue can be managed, among other ways, in the context of on-going trade agreements, for example to negotiate considered duty- and quota-free access on some exports (as the Maldives has done and even Bangladesh has approached the EU in 2020, prior to being assessed in the 2021 triennial review) or to replicate the 2016 Free Trade Agreement between the EU and Vietnam, that provide for similar access to European markets for non-LDCs. Although Bangladesh, Lao PDR and Nepal are more advanced on the graduation pathway, the ability of Cambodia to maintain its competitiveness after graduation has to be carefully studied, taking into account factors such as labour productivity and the ability of industries in the countries to upgrade their products and processes. As one example, if countries need to meet stricter rules of origin requirements after graduation involving double transformation, in the textile and clothing sector this can favour graduating countries that can produce textiles domestically as well as clothing.



Source: Author’s illustration based on 2018 TR data.

Graduation from LDC status will have some impacts but – at least based on the experiences of other graduating countries – is unlikely to have far-reaching ramifications. Further research into each of the three LDC criteria indicators and the graduation process itself will ensure that macroeconomic strategies and sector reforms are in place to move Cambodia towards graduation while ensuring that adequate transition arrangements can also be assured. Trade access with the EU will change such as loss of access to the EU’s Everything but Arms (EBA) scheme following

an additional three-year transition period after graduation becomes effective; Cambodia already has some experience managing this impact with the partial EBA withdrawal in 2020. While LMIE status may be associated with some development partners reviewing their country programmes, Cambodia's continued LDC status, coupled with global commitments under the Financing for Development framework, can be used to support resource mobilization efforts under certain LDC-specific sources such as the LDC Fund, and direct ODA allocations to maximum effect in line with national development goals.

A strategy that is based on ensuring an informed and country-led approach to LDC graduation – with its focus on increasing income, improving health and education outcomes, transforming industry and agriculture, increasing productive capacity and facilitating trade - can be used as a stepping stone towards achieving the SDGs. The Royal Government of Cambodia will therefore demonstrate its continued commitment to national and global development goals, maintain its partnership-based approach to managing development cooperation and ensure that ODA is catalytic and directed to supporting the development of the real economy, improved public services and stronger institutions. Cambodia will also continue to make full use of the international support measures (ISMs) made available to LDCs, including reviewing their current or potential future use.

2.2 Stakeholder Review

General Assembly resolution 67/221, para. 7, emphasized that a successful transition should be based on a national smooth transition strategy elaborated as a priority by each graduating country involving, as appropriate, all stakeholders of the Istanbul Programme of Action, and with the support of the international community. As described below, ISMs for LDCs mainly cover the areas of trade, certain specific sources of development assistance (e.g., the LDC Fund for climate change adaptation) and technical cooperation, as well as support such as budget caps and travel costs to participate in international organizations. For that reason, a smooth transition strategy may involve government counterparts responsible for areas such as national planning, trade, economics, commerce and international affairs and climate change, as well as private sector and non-government counterparts that may be affected by the transition in these areas.

Despite meeting the LDC graduation criteria, Cambodia has not designated a national body to lead the graduation work as yet. There are a number of stakeholders in the Government that can be the key players for this task including the Ministry of Planning (MOP) which is mandated to prepare the country's strategic development plans (including producing data), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MFAIC), the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF) which is responsible for domestic resource mobilization policy and fiscal policy, the Ministry of Commerce (MOC) which works on trade related issues and policy, the National Committee for the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (NC-ESCAP) that plays a coordinating role with the government line ministries and agencies with regards to technical support needed within each ministry and agency and with UNESCAP regarding technical support available for Cambodia, and the Council for the Development of Cambodia (CDC) that leads the work on ODA and FDI.

Some stakeholders from the private sector should be consulted as well on their knowledge of LDC graduation, how the graduation would affect their businesses, which incentive measures would be useful to ensure smooth transition and promote public-private partnership (PPP) for development going forward. First, the Cambodia Chamber of Commerce (CCC) needs to be engaged. This is a voluntary-based membership and is a not-for-profit institution representing private sector interests and advocating for a more conducive environment for businesses. Second, Cambodia Rice Federation which is a voice of the Cambodia rice industry and acknowledged by RGC as a sole partnership for policy discussion will be engaged in this work. Third, the Garment Manufacturing Association of Cambodia (GMAC) provides a forum for consultation and discussion among members/stakeholders of common interests and seeks the adoption of sound policies allowing the industry to grow and develop.

As for civil society and academic institutions, Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI) will be engaged given its work to produce policy-relevant development research that is key for Cambodia's sustainable development in partnership with Cambodian government institutions and their international development partners. Second, the Non-Government Organisations (NGO) Forum of Cambodia that builds NGO cooperation and capacity, supporting NGO networks and other civil society organizations (CSOs) to engage in policy dialogue, debate and advocacy, will be invited to engage in this study. Third, the Cambodia Agricultural Value Chain (CAVAC) Program will be engaged. CAVAC's goal is to increase productivity and incomes for smallholder farmers in Cambodia but rather than work directly with farmers, most of its activities are delivered in partnership with their suppliers and regulators, the government and the private sector, using a market systems approach to spread knowledge about new agricultural techniques.

3. Survey Results

Graduation from LDC status is normally viewed as a positive milestone reflecting the development progress a country has made. While assessments in most countries have found that impacts of graduation are mostly limited and manageable, the General Assembly has emphasized the importance of graduating countries preparing strategies for smooth transition from the category with support from the international community and, as appropriate, other stakeholders. Similarly, some graduating countries have called for enhanced support from the international community during the transition period.

This survey aimed to seek feedback from national stakeholders on the types of international support that might be most useful for Cambodia – including measures to help phase out or compensate for the loss of existing support (e.g., trade preferences, the LDC Fund and other LDC-targeted mechanisms such as the UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF)) and also “think outside the box” about new types of measures that might be useful. A questionnaire survey was developed that included a longlist of possible support measures and was designed to be delivered during a small number of in-person interviews.

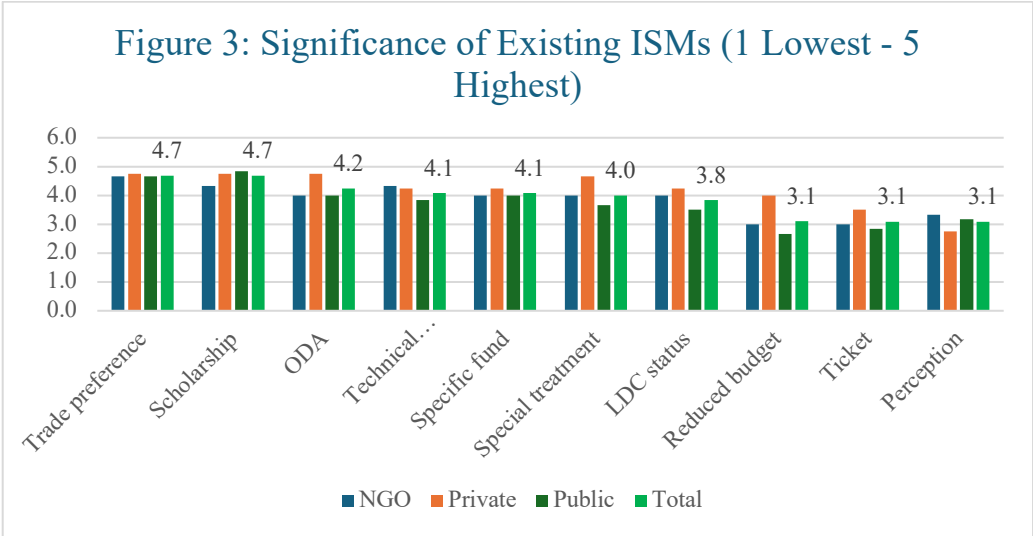
Survey results aim to serve as a starting point for a discussion in Cambodia on the graduation/transition support that would be most important and useful to the country. It was not a

scientific exercise and given that LDC graduation is a specialized topic, the survey aimed only for a minimum of six responses. That said, it did aim for well informed responses from different thematic areas, and from stakeholders in Government, private sector and civil society. Respondents were therefore selected with a view to covering as many sectors as possible as well as their knowledge of LDC graduation issues.

The survey aimed to address the question of which existing support measures are most helpful and which therefore might be extended after graduation; what the key challenges are likely after graduation; and what might be the best ways of mitigating those challenges and providing assistance after graduation. Interviewees were requested to concentrate on the support needed during graduation, rather than analysis of the country’s prospects for graduation or the impact of graduation, subjects which will be covered in other documents. The survey anticipated a small number of interviews with stakeholders who should be most knowledgeable about LDC graduation, including government, private sector and civil society, and from groups that could influence or might be affected by the graduation process.

3.1 Significance of existing ISMs

This section discusses the findings from a survey of 13 policy makers, researchers, and experts from different backgrounds (as explained in the preceding section) including government sector, NGOs, research institutes, and the private sector on their perceptions about the benefits of LDC status on Cambodia’s economy and development. The survey revealed that the most cited benefit of LDC membership is preferential market access to the US and EU markets via General System of Preference (GSP) and EBA schemes, followed by capacity building and technical assistance and ODA, which includes grants and concessional loans. Respondents also mentioned that Cambodia can export a significant amount of garment, footwear, travel goods and agricultural products, thanks to preferential market access given by GSP and EBA.



Source: Author’s survey 2020.

There are some variations among respondents according to their sectors they represented. While respondents from public and private sectors constantly viewed a preferential market access as the main benefit derived from the LDC membership, those from NGOs and civil society described ODA as the most significant. Moreover, some benefits were listed by respondents from some sectors but not mentioned at all by respondents from other sectors. For instance, only some respondents from the public sector pointed out that benefits from LDC membership could be political and diplomatic, in the sense that LDCs as a group could have more negotiating power than an individual LDC. On the other hand, only representatives from the NGO sector regarded scholarships as a relevant, existing ISM for Cambodia.

When respondents were asked to assign a value (1-5 scale, 1 for not important and 5 for very important) on the importance of different kinds of ISMs, trade preferences topped the list followed by scholarships and ODA whereas tickets to support participation at the General Assembly and other UN meetings and reduced budgetary contributions to the UN as well as signaling and perceptions were lowest in the spectrum. One respondent commented that the government should share the cost of tickets to attend the UN General Assembly and other UN meetings. Although trade-related technical support figured as an important benefit, some of the respondents complained that the scope and financial package of technical assistance is limited, and most of the technical assistance programmes are donor-driven.

The beneficiaries of these existing ISMs were reported to include a wide range of stakeholders including government officers, NGOs, private sector workers as well as farmers. All of these beneficiaries may gain differently from ISMs. For instance, factory workers benefit from trade preferences, poor students benefit from scholarships, disadvantaged people may benefit from ODA provided to either the government or NGOs, and the public and private sector and researchers may benefit from capacity building and technical assistance from donors.

Nonetheless, despite those mentioned benefits, some respondents voiced concerns over ODA effectiveness. They raised cases where development funding from abroad was not effectively utilized by some NGOs to ease the burden of the poor and disadvantaged people due to a lack of checks and balances as well as monitoring and evaluation mechanism.

Some barriers potentially constraining Cambodia from reaping benefits from ISMs were also brought up by respondents. First, lack of analytical knowledge and market information may hinder all concerned stakeholders to leverage ISMs such as GSP/EBA for Cambodia's benefit. Second, lack of technical staff combined with limited technical capacity make it difficult to develop proposals to mobilize grants which also require the applicants to fulfil complicated application procedures.

Many concerns over losing benefits due to graduation were also raised. One respondent mentioned that the implementation progress would be slower than planned due to lower government budget availability and less supports as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which will affect the government budget in 2020 and may also affect the budget allocation in 2021 as well. There is also a belief that all the 17 goals are inter-dependent and hence when one goal is affected by lower

funding the rest will follow. They all believed that the impact will be felt more severely by poor, disadvantaged and female groups, they mostly work in sectors which are vulnerable to external shocks such as the garment industry and rice farming and have narrower employment opportunities outside these sectors, compared to the other groups.

Although respondents expressed concern about a reduction in funding and other support stemming from LDC graduation, it was not clear if the few, specific sources tied to LDC status were clearly distinguished from broader trends in ODA that are not. In addition, some respondents argued the impacts should not be of concern, since Cambodia will have enough technical capacity and sufficient resources to stand without ISMs by the time of graduation. In line with broader shifts in development assistance (including the “dual transition” to lower middle-income status), rather than graduation from LDC status itself, Cambodia may need to take more loans while co-financing by the public and the private sector will also be crucial to fund infrastructure projects. One respondent expressed the need for the country to conduct an in-depth study on possible impacts of graduation.

3.2 Financing for Sustainable Development

Availability of development finance has been one of the key channels impacting the achievement of the SDGs, and questions were asked about the importance and relevance of new forms of finance, including blended finance, private sector provision of certain types of development assistance, public private partnership, co-financing and other public-private arrangements. All respondents assigned high value (4-5 on a scale of 1: not important to 5: very important) to the modality of public-private financing for post-graduation development. They believed that this new form of development financing modality is crucial to offset decreasing ISMs after graduation and to resources to meet increasing infrastructure demands while coping with the COVID-19 crisis. Respondents felt that this would be a more efficient financing solution than wholly public or wholly private-sector modalities and the private sector should be encouraged to provide joint public services.

The public private partnership is said to provide numerous benefits for both the government and private sector sides. First, this modality offers access to private capital to supplement public funds, which gives the government an opportunity to reallocate resources that would otherwise be devoted to building a hospital, for instance. The government can actually use that budget to focus on healthcare needs and outcomes rather than on building maintenance. Many respondents cited that this modality fits well with big infrastructure projects such as agro-industrial parks, SME special zones, highways, and airports. Second, it benefits the public sector in terms of access to more efficient technology, management, and skills from the private sector, especially from multinational companies. Third, the benefit that PPP offers to the private sector is the opportunities to work on mega infrastructure projects, helping them to develop knowledge, experience and skills, which they can then constructively reapply back into the private sector. When projects are well executed, the monetary rewards for companies involved in PPPs are significant and long-lasting.

Respondents also identified some drawbacks and challenges which can be summarized as follows. First, PPP can create monopolies, since there are only a limited number of private entities with the

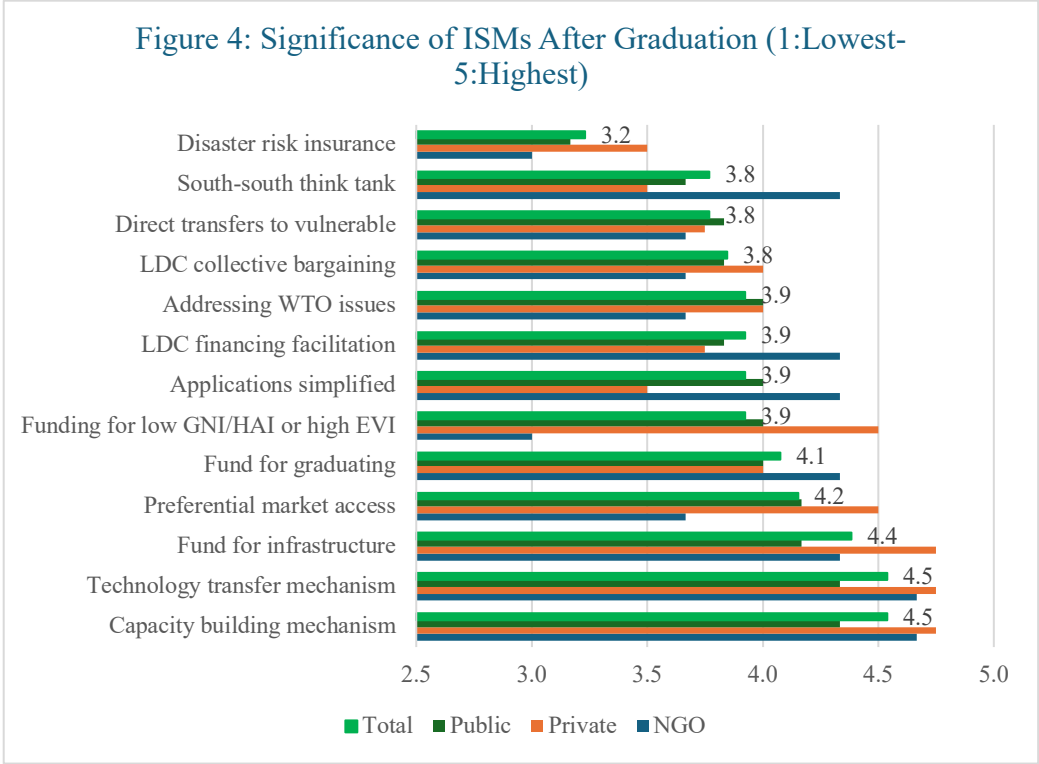
capability to complete certain projects, such as constructing a high-speed rail system; the relatively small field of bidders might mean less competition and thus less cost-effective partnering. Second, if the expertise in the partnership lies heavily on the private side, the government is at an inherent disadvantage as it might be unable to accurately assess the proposed costs. Third, mistrust could be an issue which prohibits PPPs to take place. Some respondents suggested the institutional capacity of the government especially in the areas of implementation and monitoring – with a strong evidence base through availability and accessibility of quality data should be strengthened and relevant laws and regulations must be in place to ensure transparency and justice so that power balance between government and the private sector is maintained.

When asked if defensive interest on new types of development assistance should be adopted, all respondents indicated that restrictions should not be placed on the private sector as long as they do not violate Cambodia's laws and principles, because private sector can be more efficient than the public sector in terms of service delivery. On the contrary, the government, should encourage them to provide services under a clear monitoring mechanism and line of accountability to avoid overlapping and to ensure that any investment or service delivery will not negatively affect a certain group of people, especially the poor and vulnerable. Different respondents had different views about the services and projects that would be best implemented through PPPs depending on the sector they represent. Areas listed include big infrastructure projects such as highways, airports, ports, and SME parks, agro-industry and industrial development zones, investment in the agriculture and tourism sectors as well as human capital development, which can help revive the economy and have been hard hit by the COVID-19 crisis.

Respondents agreed that donors should be requested to make more use of the LDC indicators in aid allocation—although it is possible these views may change following the 2021 triennial review, where Cambodia met graduation thresholds in all three LDC indicators, meaning this approach might not work in Cambodia's favour in the future. They also agreed that non-DAC countries consider providing loans with low interest and a long grace period as given by DAC donors.

3.3 Potential New Ideas for Assistance Following Graduation

With a view to minimize the magnitude of shocks in the post-graduation development process due to loss of LDC-specific ISMs, respondents were asked to rate (1-5, 1 denoting bad idea and 5 denoting excellent idea) potential post-graduation assistance measures. The mean score of the ranking is presented in Chart 3. It shows that mean scores of all the proposed measures are above 3.8, except for the disaster risk insurance facility for graduating and former LDCs. Both capacity-development mechanisms or facilities to improve the generation of public finances and a mechanism to support transfer of technology and know-how received the highest score (4.5), followed by a fund for infrastructure investment in graduating and former LDCs (4.4), support for continued preferential market access (4.2), and a fund for graduating and former LDCs (4.1).



Source: Author’s survey 2020.

There is a common view among respondents that the most important support measures for Cambodia during and after graduation would be trade preferences (GSP), followed by ODA to finance infrastructure projects and to develop human capital in terms of skills upgrading, technology absorptive capacity enhancement, and healthcare improvement for the population, and technical assistance and capacity building on developing alternative financing sources such as how to manage PPPs and capital markets and on handling international-trade related issues for government officials. Cambodia would still need these ISMs for many more years even after graduation.

4. Other Information on LDC Graduation Support

This section summarizes findings of other existing documents and information relevant to identification of specific support measures for LDC graduation. It attempts to address the following issues (1) to what degree are existing international support measures (ISMs) being used in the country and what are the main barriers to using them? (2) are there any specific stakeholders or groups that might be especially affected by LDC graduation (considering differentiated impacts on men and women and disadvantaged groups in the country)? (3) important support measures needed in the context of sustainable production transformation and development, gender disparities and

other inequalities, employment, conflict, climate risk, environmental sustainability and debt sustainability, and COVID-19 recovery.

4.1 Use of Existing ISMs and Barriers

International support measures (ISMs) have been developed for LDCs in the context of international agreements and organizations as well as by individual countries, educational institutions and others. There have been an increasing number of South-South initiatives in support of LDCs. ISMs are mostly in the areas of trade, development cooperation, and support for participation in the United Nations and other international processes. As more countries approach graduation, there has also been increasing emphasis in securing support for a smooth transition out of the category. More detailed information on ISMs for LDCs is available at <https://www.un.org/ldcportal/support-measures-portal-for-ldcs>.

While ISMs for LDCs include some specific areas of support, LDC graduation may occur at the same time as other transitions such as graduation to different concessional windows of international financial institutions, or together with general trends in ODA. For instance, while sectors such as health and education may not be affected greatly by LDC graduation itself, simply because few ISMs (with the exception of scholarships) provide support in these areas, it may be useful for a country to address any other trends in support in these areas in tandem with its smooth transition strategy, provided it is clearly understood which trends are linked with LDC graduation and which are not.

The information below is linked with areas in which ISMs are currently provided specifically for LDCs. Broader areas of development assistance including the programmes of United Nations entities have not been covered since—although they are available to and sometimes targeted to some degree at LDCs—they are normally provided more broadly to developing countries including LDCs, small island developing States (SIDS) and other priority groups. That said, it would be important for Cambodia, the UN and development partners, to identify any other areas of bilateral or multilateral support not listed below that might be phased out or significantly affected by LDC graduation, so they can be addressed in the country's smooth transition strategy.

Trade Preferences

Tariff preferences have played an important role in determining the growth of Cambodia's exports during the last decade and this has become even more pronounced in recent years. Cambodian exports enjoy duty-free market access under a variety of duty-free quota-free programs that developed, and some developing countries have put in place for LDCs. Cambodia is also expected to enjoy duty-free access within ASEAN and benefit from the free trade agreements concluded with ASEAN dialogue partners, although these measures are not specifically tied to LDC status. In addition, Cambodia recently signed the Asia-Pacific RCEP which renewed hopes for comprehensive change in the flow of regional trade and investment and the promotion of intra-bloc supply chains capable of bolstering trust among members of the region's business sector. RCEP-unified rules of origin regulations will encourage manufacturers in the more advanced countries in the RCEP bloc to minimize costs by outsourcing finishing work to the less well-off

ASEAN nations.⁹⁹ RCEP provides some flexibility for less-developed members to implement the practical and legislative changes it requires (although again the measures are not specifically tied to LDC status).

However, there are a series of findings indicating that trade preferences have not been fully utilized due to non-trade conditionalities, notably human right compliance on the grounds used by the European Union to partially withdraw EBA from Cambodia and sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures, which are the main obstacle for Cambodia's agricultural products and food items to be exported to China (UNCTAD 2019). Cambodia's export products are also constrained by technical barriers to trade such as a lack of expertise and international standard laboratories (Ven, 2017).

Official Development Assistance

As an LDC, Cambodia is eligible for a number of specific sources of funding and technical assistance. The Least Developed Countries Fund (LDCF), the Enhanced Integrated Framework (EIF) and the UNCDF are funds in the form of grants that were provided to various ministries such as Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology, Ministry of Environment, FAO and some local NGOs in Cambodia through UN agencies the country including UNDP, UNEP, FAO, and IFAD.

The LDCF (see <https://www.thegef.org/topics/least-developed-countries-fund-ldcf>) was designed to address the special needs of the LDCs under the UNFCCC. It has helped countries prepare and implement National Adaptation Programs of Action (NAPAs), and also supports the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) process. Like in other countries, adaptation projects supported by the LDCF include agriculture and food security; natural resources management; disaster risk management and prevention; coastal zone management; climate information services; and infrastructure. In addition, LDCF also focuses on building resilience of key sectors and ecosystems, supporting nature-based solutions, and financing on-the-ground adaptation activities that provide concrete results in support of vulnerable communities. Some recent projects in Cambodia supported by LDCF include “Strengthening Climate Information and Early Warning Systems in Cambodia to Support Climate Resilient Development and Adaptation to Climate” implemented by Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology, “Climate Adaptation and Resilience in Cambodia's Coastal Fishery Dependent Communities” by Ministry of Environment, and “Promoting Climate-Resilient Livelihoods in Rice-Based Communities in the Tonle Sap Region” by Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF).¹⁰⁰

Cambodia also benefits from Enhanced Integrated Framework (EIF) grants that have been implemented by the Ministry of Commerce. EIF projects include (1) supporting institutions to enhance Cambodia's national capacity to formulate, implement, manage and monitor a pro-poor trade policy that is consistent and supportive of the country's National Strategic Development Plan, (2) and enhanced trade, including enhanced trade on milled rice to increase the competitiveness of

⁹⁹ <https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/new-rcep-free-trade-agreement-rules-of-origin-to-boost-finishing-of-products-investment-into-cambodia-laos-myanmar/>

¹⁰⁰ <https://unfccc.int/topics/resilience/workstreams/national-adaptation-programmes-of-action/ldc-napa-projects>

Cambodian rice exports, resulting in better earnings for rice millers and farmers in the milled rice supply chain; enhanced trade on high valued silk to promote Cambodia's high-value silk exports, increasing the competitiveness of the silk sector to create jobs, particularly for women, support export diversification, reduce poverty and boost income growth. Cambodian companies benefitted from individual coaching, advisory support and training to develop their products and markets; enhanced trade on cassava in market diversification, capacity building to cassava associations and exporters/processors; enhanced trade through Royal Academy of Culinary Arts to improve services in the hospitality sector; and enhanced trade through marine fisheries to ensure that the needs of the marine fisheries product export sector are better understood, and to improve the business environment and restructure the sector so that players have an active role in the national policy dialogue.¹⁰¹

Another funding source that LDC countries like Cambodia are entitled to receive is UNCDF, which has been designed to implement local development initiatives in a majority of the ASEAN member States both at national and sub-national levels. In Cambodia, UNCDF has been engaged extensively in the government's decentralization process through the Ministry of Interior and the National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development (NCDD) through various initiatives that have developed the inter-governmental fiscal transfer mechanisms that underpin sub national SDG financing through the public sector budget. UNCDF is presently working directly with the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF) within the spheres of (i) Public Private Partnerships, (ii) Financial Management and Public Policy and (iii) Macro-Economic Support as a component of this program. UNCDF is working in partnership with UNDP, the World Bank, ADB and other Development Partners in this area of work with MEF.¹⁰²

It is worth noting that the overall ODA flow to Cambodia including LDCF, GEF, and UNCDF has been increasing in absolute terms but on a declining trend as a share to GNI thanks to the growing size of the economy, and the donors' need to divert attention and resources to other developing countries which remain more disadvantaged. Some existing studies showed that in the process of making aid more effective, Cambodia and its development partners face several challenges. One of these is the complicated procedure which is found to be a constraint for Cambodia to access specific sources of ODA. For instance, despite having a clear set of climate finance priorities at the national level, Cambodia still faces challenges in accessing global climate change funds owing to complex rules and procedures, co-financing requirements and other factors (Greenhill R., A. Prizzon, and A. Rogerson 2017). This can be the reason why many projects under those funds were obtained through UN agencies.

Scholarships

Foreign governments around the world have made scholarships an important part of their aid to Cambodia. From 1980-2014, Cambodia sent 14,692 students abroad, 19 per cent of whom were women. Russia received the largest number of Cambodian students during this period (4,707

¹⁰¹ <https://enhancedif.org/en/country-profile/cambodia>

¹⁰² <https://www.uncdf.org/cambodia>

students or 32 per cent), followed by ASEAN (4,486 students or 30 per cent), OECD countries (4,370 students or 30 per cent), and China (596 students or 4 per cent). Other countries including India and Cuba received 533 Cambodian students or 4 per cent. On average, Cambodia sent 420 students abroad per year since 1980 (Chhoeun 2019). In general, Cambodian scholars were carefully selected from a pool of qualified candidates. A tracer study showed that Cambodian scholarship recipients in Australia chose a wide range of fields of study including society and culture, management and commerce, health, and agriculture and environment (Bryant 2014). Almost all scholars successfully completed their studies and returned to Cambodia. The study also indicates that scholarship recipients were able to move up their professional ladders. For instance, 47% of the Australian alumni have become managers, professional and associate professional/clerical. Likewise, graduated scholars returning to Cambodia from Japan are now working at think tanks, NGOs, government and the private sector, which has helped develop the country and build stronger institution.¹⁰³

While there is no study exploring the challenges faced by Cambodian students with regards to access to scholarships, anecdotal evidence suggests that limited number of scholarships, information asymmetry, and competition are the key issues preventing some groups of people from benefiting from this academic support. For instance, students living in the urban areas or the capital tend to have wider access to scholarship information and tend to have better command of foreign language which is a key requirement when applying for a scholarship, as compared to those students who come from rural areas or more disadvantage group. A few sources of scholarships are tied to LDC status and it would be useful to further study the impact of LDC graduation in this regard.

Technical Assistance

A joint study on effective cooperation for capacity development by the Government and development partners shows that Technical assistance (TA) was not making sufficient contribution to Cambodian development and in particular to the development of sustainable capacity (Land and Morgan 2008). The structure of the TA system and indeed most of the development assistance provided to Cambodia has fragmented into hundreds of projects, programmes and project implementation units (PIUs), a pattern that has led to duplication, high transaction costs and a lower level of aid effectiveness. Not all of this fragmentation is dysfunctional given the need for Cambodia to deal directly with some development partners. But the diversity and lack of coordination beyond a certain point has not been productive. Nonetheless, Cambodian officials want to maintain a high level of external TA personnel given their own needs to get work done, manage their departments and agencies and keep up their performance (IMF 2003, Land and Morgan 2008).

¹⁰³ <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/students-granted-japan-scholarships>

Financing Infrastructure Investment

Cambodia requires significant financial resources to close infrastructure financing gaps. A number of types and sources of financing have been used by Cambodia. These include the domestic public sector, ODA from development partners and multilateral development banks, the private sector, new regional initiatives and infrastructure funds as well as new financing vehicles. However, the extent to which these are viable options varies across sectors.

For example, private investment has been more prevalent in energy and ICT infrastructure, enabled in part by the potential of these sectors to generate revenue. Yet, the potential for private financing, both domestic and international, remains limited due to underdeveloped domestic capital markets, lack of access to international capital markets or simply a lack of economies of scale. In general, infrastructure projects are rarely ranked as the most attractive option to deploy capital on a risk adjusted basis. There are global alternatives which present higher return in other asset classes for the same level of risk.

Similarly, while external resources, such as ODA and financing through multilateral development banks, play an important role in infrastructure financing, they constitute only a small proportion of total infrastructure spending, and may be limited in areas of cooperation, instruments of financing as well as dependent on the preferences and capacities of donors. Nevertheless, these sources are especially important in economies with small populations and in the least developed economies of the region, where private sector participation in infrastructure financing is likely to be limited given the lack of capital markets and absence of economies of scale.

New emerging sources of long-term finance such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have also been tapped by Cambodia, including from institutional investors, through new global and regional initiatives including climate financing, or supported by the development of capital markets.

4.2 Effects of LDC Graduation

When a country graduates from the LDC category, it no longer benefits from LDC-specific international support measures (for some measures there are “smooth transition” periods). This sub-section assesses the likely impact of LDC graduation on specific stakeholders based on existing literature. Specifically, it examines the impact of LDC graduation in the aspects of preferential market access, World Trade Organization (WTO) commitments, and development cooperation.

Preferential market access

One of the main support measures for LDCs is preferential access to markets. The actual impact of losing LDC-specific preferences depends on what goods the country exports, the trade agreements it may be a part of and other factors. There is no empirical study on the impact of LDC graduation on trade and socio-economic development in Cambodia. However, there are some studies which attempted to address the impact of Everything but Arms (EBA) suspension for Cambodia which can be applied for the loss of preferential access in general after LDC graduation.

According to a report released by European Union, Cambodian textile and footwear exports to the EU are up to 11% and 17% higher than they would be under standard tariffs. This competitive advantage has fuelled an export boom, helped to keep the economy growing at a steady 7% a year, and to lift one-third of the country's population out of poverty between 2007 and 2014.¹⁰⁴ According to the same EU report, suspending the EBA could put some of these achievements at risk by making the country's exports less competitive, which can directly affect around 2 million Cambodians depending on the textile industry, including 750,000 employees, mostly women (Martin R. 2019). More recent official figures showed that the kingdom's exports from the garment sector to the international markets dropped more than 6.4 percent to around \$1.78 billion in the first quarter of 2021 as compared to exports of \$1.89 during the corresponding period of a year earlier.¹⁰⁵ The drop was mostly in the EU market, where the sector has lost 20 percent of the trade preferences under EBA, adding to the impact of COVID-19.¹⁰⁶

WTO commitments

Leaving the LDC category will mean the country no longer benefits from LDC-specific special and differential treatment (SDT) in the fulfillment of WTO commitments or from LDC-specific support for the WTO accession process. SDT provisions for LDCs aim principally to facilitate compliance with WTO rules in view of the limited capacities of LDCs; to protect their policy space; and to support them in increasing their participation in international trade by addressing supply-side constraints and supporting trade-related elements of development strategies. To date, there is no quantitative study yet on the impact of LDC graduation on SDT for Cambodia. However, international literature indicates that loss of preferences and ineligibility to access WTO SDT provisions for LDCs are the most important challenges from graduation. For instance, graduated countries will be required to provide Intellectual Property (IP) protection as envisaged under the TRIPS Agreement, which are exempted from implementing the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement until 1 July 2021 (General Transition Period) and would also no longer benefit from a specific and longer transition period from providing patent protection for pharmaceutical products, i.e. until 1 January 2033. This would have an impact on intellectual and health development aspect of Cambodian people, especially for disadvantaged groups, and might also be considered as a lost opportunity to promote industrial development in sectors such as pharmaceutical production.

Official Development Assistance

There has been an impressive proliferation of NGOs in development cooperation in Cambodia since the first general election took place in 1993 thanks largely to the belief that NGOs could have advantages over the public sector when it comes to aid effectiveness. Specific instruments have also been put in place to support the development of trade capacity, financing climate change

¹⁰⁴ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2019/637931/EPRS_ATAG\(2019\)637931_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2019/637931/EPRS_ATAG(2019)637931_EN.pdf)

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.fibre2fashion.com/news/apparel-news/cambodia-s-garment-exports-fall-6-43-in-q1-2021-273848-newsdetails.htm>

¹⁰⁶ https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50780195/bilateral-trade-with-the-us-stays-strong/?fbclid=IwAR2V-ddL849X4qMpd9nWqN0odM3r6G_P6DxzMn3ttD8HFv1BrF5oVYR_LOQ

adaptation and others. ODA in the form of grants, which has been playing an important role in promoting the economic and welfare of the poorest segment of the Cambodian population has been on a declining trend. After leaving the LDC category, Cambodia may no longer have access to specific sources of support, notably the LDC Fund under the UNFCCC.

4.3 Important Support Measures for Sustainable Production Transformation

The COVID-19 pandemic and the past crisis indicate that Cambodia is vulnerable to external shocks when relying on traditional/existing sources of income and growth. Existing literature suggests that more efforts need to be made to improve labor productivity, invest in infrastructure, and attract FDI to speed up economic diversification and sustain economic growth, going forward.

First, human capital in terms of skill and education needs to be improved or Cambodia may fall into a “low skill, low wage development trap”, a scenario under which multinational corporations (MNCs) will bypass Cambodia and shift to other emerging ASEAN countries and undermine the prospect of industrialization (UNDP 2014). Authors of the World Bank’s 2019 Cambodia’s Future Jobs report note the average worker in the Kingdom has less than 6.5 years of total education and few opportunities to learn new skills throughout their career. The report states more than 17% of firms surveyed by the bank identified “inadequately skilled labor force” as a constraint to doing business.

Second, inadequate infrastructure has long been one of Cambodia’s key constraints and is seen as a major bottleneck which needs to be removed. Cambodia’s performance in logistics is uncompetitive compared to neighboring countries due to high logistic cost which stems from poor quality of logistics services and inadequate quality of the transport infrastructure. The cost and time to export a container from Sihanoukville, Cambodia’s major seaport, is much higher than the global average, as reflected in the country’s poor ranking in the Trading Across Borders indicators of Doing Business (108th out of 190 countries) (World Bank 2018). Investment in physical capital, which is so far mainly financed by development partners, will remain fundamental for maintaining Cambodia’s competitiveness in the future (WB 2017).

Third, Cambodia is one of the very few LDC countries that has been able to make use of opportunities arising from trade preferences to increase its exports. So far, trade preferential treatment including EBA and GSP is found to be crucial to expand exports especially to the US and EU markets and played a leading role in attracting FDI inflows from developing countries, particularly China (Yoon Seon Han and Jai S. Mah 2015). Upon graduation, however, trade preferences will be phased out after a transitional time period or immediately depending on the provisions of the preference-giving country. Given the current situation Cambodia will have more time before graduation. To make best use of LDC status, however, Cambodia together with other ASEAN LDCs should initiate a positive agenda aimed at negotiating current and future FTAs as an ASEAN LDC group to make a clear distinct subgroup of ASEAN to make FTA partners adopt differentiated ASEAN offers, one for ASEAN and a second one for ASEAN LDCs according to their special and different situation (UNCTAD 2020).

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study found that some existing or new support measures are needed for the country to underpin production transformation and sustain economic growth. In particular:

- Firstly, preferential market access, which helps expand exports to the US, EU and other developed countries, continues to be very important for Cambodia post-graduation. Cambodia should consider important areas where it should negotiate for longer transition periods or continued preferences (e.g., under the EC's GSP+ arrangement), additional trade preferences that can be negotiated with other partners, or measures to make more extensive use of preferences under regional trade agreements.
- Second, both the survey findings and existing literature show that the country still needs scholarships and other capacity building support to strengthen human capital, which is an important production factor. Among other things, Cambodia should assess impacts of LDC graduation in this area and disseminate information on existing opportunities more widely to different parts of the population, especially those in the remote and rural areas.
- Third, ODA such as concessional loans and technical assistance will remain crucial for Cambodia's development. Again, it would be worthwhile for the country to consider how best to make use of LDC-specific mechanisms such as the LDC Fund, EIF, Technology Bank and UNCDF before graduation, and whether any strategic uses of these mechanisms would need to be addressed after graduation.
- Fourth, capacity development in the areas of policymaking and resource mobilization of specific funds are also one of ISMs the country needs, while commitments to WTO should be delayed to a certain period. Among other things, building the country's capacity to manage PPPs in the public interest would be a high priority, given their high potential but also the high degree of difficulty in managing them.

Despite now meeting the LDC graduation criteria for the first time, Cambodia has no national committee or designated institution yet to lead the graduation work. Other countries' experiences suggest that in order to ensure a smooth transition, Cambodia needs to set up a national committee to coordinate this graduation work or add this function to an existing Committee responsible for issues such as national planning or the Sustainable Development Goals, especially the National Committee for Statistical Reform Agenda, to ensure that data ecosystem is ready to quickly facilitate and graduate Cambodia from traditional to digital economy. The national committee should be led by a senior minister who is actively involved with UN affairs and very familiar with LDC graduation issues and who can encourage other line ministries and agencies as well as private sector and civil society to work together toward the common goal. The Committee would coordinate with the UN Resident Coordinator's Office and negotiate with relevant development and trade partners in the preparation of a detailed transition strategy, in particular reducing ISMs in a phased manner.

A comprehensive stakeholder analysis on who should be involved in such a committee to oversee and to ensure a smooth transition need to be conducted. There is value in undertaking such analysis to better understand expectations of stakeholders and the role each can play to overcome the challenges and maximize the opportunities associated with graduation, which will require collaborative partnerships between government, businesses, civil society, and the country's development and trading partners. Working together, these partnerships should honour the global commitments made by the international community and serve to deliver Cambodia's long-term aspiration to become an upper middle-income economy by 2030 and high-income economy by 2050.

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Doha programme of actions and Cambodia's pentagon strategy: mapping and alignment

*Dr. PHIM Runsinarith**

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The Doha Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2022-2031 (DPoA), which was adopted in March 2022, represents a revitalized and reinforced agreement forged between the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and their development partners. By prioritizing the cultivation of productive capacities, the enhancement of human capital, and the facilitation of seamless transitions, the DPoA aspires to foster an all-encompassing and enduring form of development for the LDCs. The DPoA has six key focus areas include:

- (1) investing in people in LDCs: eradicating poverty and building capacity to leave no one behind.
- (2) leveraging the power of science, technology, and innovation to fight against multidimensional vulnerabilities and to achieve the SDGs.
- (3) supporting structural transformation as a driver of prosperity.
- (4) enhancing international trade of LDCs and regional integration.
- (5) addressing climate change, environmental degradation, recovering from COVID-19 pandemic and building resilience against future shocks for risk-informed sustainable development; and
- (6) mobilizing international solidarity, reinvigorated global partnerships and innovative tools and instruments: a march towards sustainable graduation.

The DPoA has the potential to bring significant promising benefits to Least Developed Countries (LDCs) including Cambodia, by providing a framework for renewed and strengthened commitments between LDCs and their development partners, focusing on key areas such as poverty eradication, capacity building, and climate action. First, it is a ten-year plan that outlines renewed and strengthened commitments between LDCs and their development partners, including the private sector, civil society, and governments at all levels and its six key focus areas are vital in assisting LDCs towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Second, DPoA can help LDCs access international support, resources, and expertise to achieve their development objectives and to overcome the socio-economic impacts of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Third, DPoA can contribute to the creation of sustainable, decent, and green jobs, which can help LDCs take advantage of their expanding, youthful populations, and abundant natural resources.

Note: Working Paper for Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific "ESCAP", June 2024

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Fourth, DPoA can help LDCs leverage the opportunities offered by young people, who are real agents of change for LDCs. Fifth, it can also help LDCs graduate from the least developed country status by meeting certain targets.

To effectively implement the DPoA, LDCs including Cambodia are encouraged to develop ambitious national implementation strategies and to integrate the DPoA principles into their national policies and development frameworks. One of the initial steps is to ascertain the conformity of the existing national development plans and strategies with the priorities and action areas outlined in the DPoA. This is particularly crucial for Cambodia, as they are poised to transition from the LDC category during the DPoA implementation period. Such transition poses challenges due to the termination of LDC-specific entitlements. The DPoA encompasses the objective of assisting LDCs in surmounting their distinctive development obstacles, addressing the persistent impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development along with its Sustainable Development Goals, and striving towards achieving sustainable and irreversible graduation from the LDC group.

1.2 Objectives and scope

This paper attempts to evaluate Cambodia's national development plans in relation to the DPoA's priority and action areas, identify gaps and needs for effective implementation, suggest policy adjustments for Cambodia based on the analysis, and provide insights on addressing adjustment needs in the upcoming NSDP 2024-2028, necessary policy actions for LDC graduation, harmonizing DPoA implementation with SDGs, and specific areas for Cambodia to advocate increased international support for a sustainable graduation process or successful DPoA implementation.

The primary approach to evaluating alignment involves comparing the key action area targets of the DPoA with the strategies outlined in Cambodia's Pentagon Strategy across different priority sectors and theme/subthemes. Although the Pentagon Strategy serves as a comprehensive collection of strategies and policies, there are additional sector-specific policies and strategies formulated by various ministries. However, this paper does not encompass the mapping of individual ministry's separate sectoral policy documents, as they are beyond its scope.

1.3 Methodology

In order to make the mapping comparable and easy to understand, a sector and/or its sub-sector or theme of the Plan has been taken as a unit to compare with a KAA as the corresponding study unit of the DPoA. The comparison is made mostly between the strategies. The targets/strategies of a KAA of the DPoA are compared with the strategies of a sub-sector/sector or theme of the PSI. The words used in the strategies of the two plans and their intent have been considered in the process of assessing the alignment.

Some value judgment is bound to occur when comparing qualitative strategies. To minimize such judgement, some criteria have been followed in the process of assessing the alignment, and decision has been taken about the level of the alignment, as follows:

1. *No Alignment*: When the Pentagon Strategy Phase 1 (PS1) does not include any targets or strategies like a key action area of the DPoA.
2. *Partial Alignment*: When the Pentagon Strategy Phase 1 (PS1) include to some extent targets or strategies like a key action area of the DPoA.
3. *Adequate Alignment*: When the Pentagon Strategy Phase 1 (PS1) include to most targets or strategies like a key action area of the DPoA.

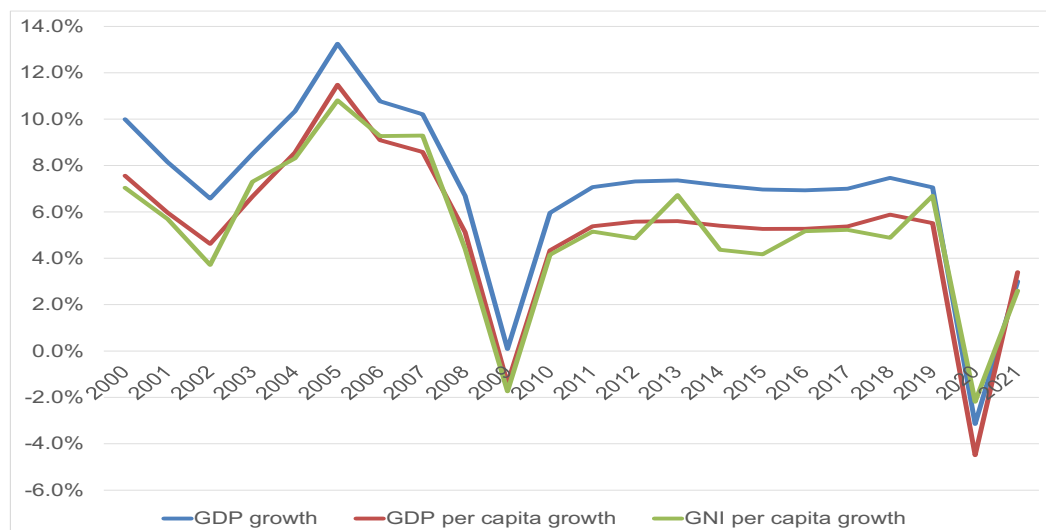
The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of key development challenges facing Cambodia. Section 3 discusses the national development strategies as laid out in the Pentagon Strategy and examines their level of alignment with the targets of the key action areas of DPoA. Section 4 identifies similarity and gaps based on the mapping and comparison of national and international strategies. The focus will be on the gaps that need to be addressed in harnessing the provisions of the DPoA based on the previous section. Section 5, suggestions are provided on specific strategies that are to be incorporated in the NSDP 2024-2028 so that Cambodia can maximize the benefit from DPoA.

2. Socio-Economic Development Progress and Challenges

2.1 Development Progress

The COVID-19 crisis and the slowdown in the global economy greatly affected Cambodia's growth performance in 2020 and growth prospects in the medium term. It posed the greatest threat to development in the country's 30 years of modern history. GDP growth, projected between 5.8% to 7% pre-COVID-19, was downwardly adjusted to -3.1% in 2020 (Figure 1). The pandemic caused a collapse of global trade, with significant negative direct and indirect impacts on Cambodia. In the United States and Europe, demand has evaporated for Cambodia's key exported products such as textiles, footwear, travel goods and rice, which comprise about 52% of total merchandise exports. Imports of intermediate goods (raw materials for textiles, footwear, and travel goods) have experienced supply chain disruptions. Job losses have resulted, affecting more than 150,000 textile, footwear, and travel goods factory workers; over 90,000 migrant workers who returned from Thailand; more than 17,000 tourism-sector workers; and an unknown but significant number of informal sector entertainment workers.

Figure 9. GDP and GNI growth performance 2000–2021



Source: World Development Indicators and MEF's Macroeconomic Framework for 2023 National Budget.

Cambodia has gradually started to recover from COVID-19 and the economic headwinds caused by the global geopolitical issues and rising inflation in 2021. Sustained and rapid development prior to COVID-19 advanced Cambodia to a lower-middle-income country in 2015 and allowed it to meet the criteria to graduate from least developed country (LDC) status for the first time in 2021. Cambodia's first assessment by the UN in 2021 reported that the GNI per capita is UA\$1,377 which surpasses the UA\$1,222 threshold; the HAI is at 74.3, which is higher than the requirement of 66; while the Economic and Environmental Vulnerability Index is at 30.6, lower than the requirement of at least 32. The next assessment of the Kingdom's LDC status will be in 2024, and if the requirements are met, it will take effect in 2027. Cambodia is currently preparing to implement the plan to leave the LDC to achieve the UN assessment in 2024 and extend the transition period as necessary.

It is worth noting that despite such impressive progress, Cambodia's economic structure remains vulnerable to exogenous shocks. Economic openness which has helped trade and the economy to prosper, has also caused economic volatility and vulnerability, as evidenced by the 2008–2009 global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. As illustrated in Figure 1, the economy did not grow during the global financial crisis in 2009 and contracted by 3.1% during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, one of the highest contractions in the Asia-Pacific region. Beyond economic contraction, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a loss of jobs and income for thousands of workers (notably those in the textile, footwear, and travel and tourism sectors), women-owned enterprises, as well as vulnerable communities and those living below the national poverty line. Women were most affected due to their prevalence in these sectors and cultural norms making them responsible for domestic care and household chores, requiring them to care for sick family members and home-

school during the pandemic. This pushed many women out of the labour force. As a result of the pandemic, poverty is estimated to have risen to 17.8% in 2020.

While rapid economic growth in recent decades elevated the income growth and living standards of most people, the benefits of the growth were distributed unevenly across population groups. The bottom percentiles of the population obtained meagre benefits from the trickle-down economic growth, as evidenced by the shares of their income and consumption, revealing inequality. This is illustrated by the poor performance of the agriculture sector, which is the main source of livelihood for 70% of the population. With formal institutions rebuilt in the aftermath of civil war and conflict, political power has been concentrated and the patronage system mainstreamed across governance. With economic openness, domestic political patronage networks have benefited markedly from the inflows of foreign capital and goods. This has been reinforced by access to natural resources, the extraction of which has generated substantial economic benefits, possibly at the expense of society, particularly the poor and vulnerable groups affected by the erosion of natural resources and land conflicts.

Progress on social indicators, notably in health and education, has also been strong, especially in the last two decades. Cambodian society is currently undergoing major transformations driven by a rapid demographic transition and progressive urbanization and industrialization. Alongside ongoing strong economic growth, trends in national social indicators have been positive. Figure 2 depicts the path of Cambodia's Human Development Index,¹⁰⁷ underlining the dramatic rate of change. Cambodia has accelerated away from the Low HDI category, of which it is also member, and it is now converging on the Medium HDI category.

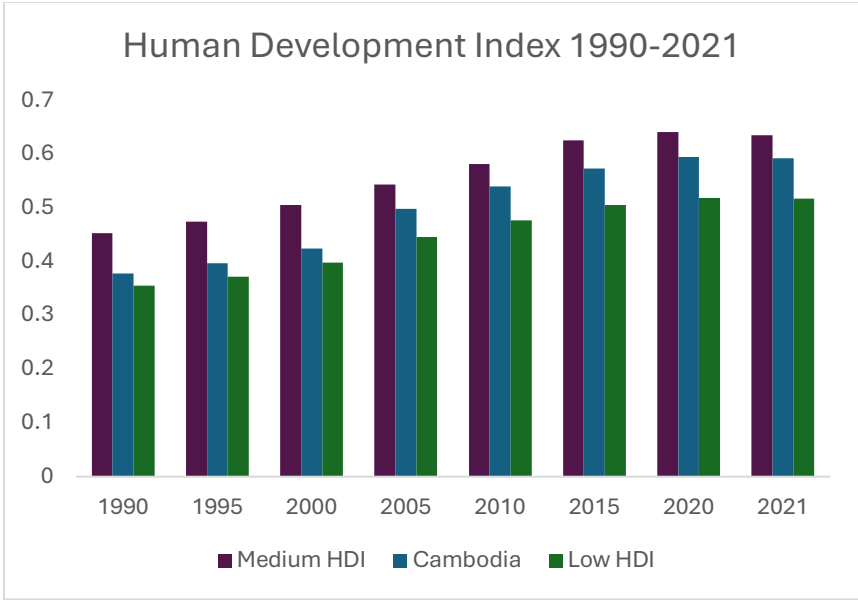
Human and social development, which had already been challenged by various factors pre-COVID-19, was also badly hit by the pandemic. Education and skills development – like other social and economic sectors – were not prepared for, or resilient to, shocks such as the pandemic. School closures disrupted learning in the estimated 13,681 schools nationwide, affecting nearly 3.3 million students (50.4% of which were female). Despite distance and online learning support provided, learning declined, and dropouts rose, with children from remote areas, children from socioeconomically marginalised households, and children with disabilities most impacted. Even prior to the pandemic, low learning quality, and high dropout and low retention rates, especially at higher education levels, were persistent challenges. The completion rate in lower secondary education is 48.1% and the survival rate at upper secondary was reduced to 24.7%. These statistics indicate that a high percentage of Cambodia's human capital is currently outside of the formal education sector and there is a need for alternative pathways to access education and skills development.

Access to affordable and quality healthcare remains far from universal, especially in relation to the near-poor and vulnerable groups living on the margins of poverty, as well as populations who are stigmatized or marginalized (e.g., such as those living with and/or affected by HIV). Public health expenditure dropped from 6.4% of the total national budget (2020) to an estimated 4.8% (2021) (excluding allocations to fight COVID-19). Over three out of five, specially first and second, visits

¹⁰⁷ HDI is a combined metric of GNI per capita, life expectancy and educational attainment (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/data>)

for healthcare are in the private sector, despite lower cost and more social health insurance coverage of public services. Patients’ out-of-pocket expenditure is exceptionally high at 60% of total health expenditure. The proportion of households experiencing high health expenditure (over 10% of total consumption) improved in 2009–2014 but has since reversed, rising from 13% in 2014 to 18% in 2019, with rural households most affected (over 20% versus ~13% for urban households). The loss of income and livelihoods due to the pandemic has amplified risk and vulnerability in healthcare protection. The pandemic overstretched the health system, leading to low utilization of sexual reproductive and maternal services. Outpatient visits declined by over 25% (2019–2021), indicating a need to expand social health insurance coverage.

Figure 10: Human Development Index 1990 onwards



Source: UNDP HDI data (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/data>).

The pandemic – coupled with rising pressures on the environmental ecosystem due to economic development, natural resource exploitation, rapid climate change, and other environmental challenges – has compromised progress in food security and nutrition. Food availability has not been a critical issue at the macro level and agricultural production, a backbone of national food security, vastly expanded during the pandemic with increasing production of crops, poultry, animal raising, fisheries, and other agricultural activities; however, the rapidly changing climate and other environmental challenges have adversely affected agriculture and food systems, jeopardising food security and nutrition. Cambodia is ranked as one of the countries which is most vulnerable to climate change as it is prone to climate hazards including floods and droughts. Much of the population relies on climate-dependent agriculture for livelihoods, lives in areas geographically susceptible to floods, and depends on a single crop production (rice).

Malnutrition, already high in pre-pandemic times, has been aggravated due to the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic. Whereas child stunting (low height-for-age) or chronic malnutrition significantly improved from a prevalence rate of 34% in 2014 to 22% in 2021, child wasting (low weight-for-height) or acute malnutrition remained unchanged at around 10%. Only 10% of children under five suffering from wasting in Cambodia currently have access to treatment. It is worth noting that malnutrition varies across provinces. Overall, 22% of the population cannot afford a healthy diet. With 17.8% of the population living in poverty, rising energy and food prices are likely to exacerbate food insecurity and malnutrition. Meanwhile, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are one of the main causes of death in Cambodia. NCDs accounted for more than half of deaths, and it is estimated that NCDs cost Cambodia about US\$1.5 billion in healthcare and productivity loss, equivalent to 6.6% of GDP in 2018.

Mine action is also high on the country's leadership agenda; an additional SDG, CSDG 18, related to the clearance of landmines and ERW was added to the localized version of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. Cambodia still faces multiple consequences resulting from landmine contamination which is the result of a protracted sequence of internal and regional conflicts that affected the country from the mid-1960s until the end of 1998. The north-western region bordering Thailand has some of the densest global concentrations of anti-personnel mines (APM) while other areas of the country, mainly in the east, have been impacted primarily by the presence of explosive remnants of war (ERW), including cluster munitions. Mines and ERW have killed and injured over 65,000 people in Cambodia since 1979. Although, the number of annual casualties has been brought down from 4,320 in 1996 to 44 in 2021, Cambodia has some of the highest numbers of casualties in the world. Mines and ERW continue to kill, injure, and traumatize people and communities. They severely impede humanitarian responses, peacebuilding and stabilization efforts, as well as social and economic recovery, and sustainable development.

At this critical juncture, stronger investments in social sectors and human development are vital to ensure the success of Cambodia's economy in the longer term. Moreover, an increase in investment in gender equality and women's rights is needed to bridge the gender wage gap and remove barriers to enter and/or be a part of the formal labour force. With a population of 15.6 million, the median age is 27 years and people under 35 years comprise 64.2% of the population. The young population offers an opportunity for a socioeconomic transformation with an abundant labour force, entrepreneurship, and economic innovation if given access to education and skills development to equip them with 21st century skills. At the same time, new entrants to the labour force require better employment, social services, and governance. This is also an opportunity to expand and strengthen the tax base and revenue to cope with projected rising demands for social protection during times when the labour force is shrinking. While there is a window of opportunity, Cambodia is shifting to a more intermediate age structure given a steady increase in people over 30 years and a steady increase expected of those over 60 years, reflecting a reduction in adult mortality.

To ensure sustainable, inclusive development, investment in human capital development (quality education, healthcare, food system, nutrition, social protection) is vital. Addressing these supply-side challenges also helps strengthen socioeconomic resilience and tackle inequalities within urban areas and between urban and rural areas. In tandem with larger investments in the social sector

(e.g., expansion of social protection coverage for the poor and vulnerable), economic openness needs to be better managed to support sustainable growth in which the benefits are shared across population groups.

2.2 Key Challenges and Policy Gaps

Cambodia has made significant strides in its development journey, transitioning from decades of conflict to rapid economic growth and improved living standards. However, the country faces a new set of challenges as it aspires to reach upper-middle-income status within a decade.

Cambodia's development challenges and policy gaps encompass a wide range of areas, including infrastructure, ease of doing business, skill development, inclusive growth, and human capital investment.

1. *Infrastructure*: Despite increasing public investment, Cambodia still faces challenges related to high energy costs, insufficient electricity supply, and shortcomings in its transportation network. Addressing these infrastructure gaps is crucial for sustaining economic growth and fostering competitiveness.
2. *Ease of Doing Business*: Cambodia ranks low among Southeast Asian countries in terms of ease of doing business. The cost of doing business is high due to burdensome government procedures. Improving the business environment and governance is essential to enhance competitiveness and attract investments.
3. *Skill Gap*: Cambodia's skill gap poses a significant challenge to the country's development. The need to upgrade the industrial structure from labor-intensive production to one driven by skills by 2025 highlights the importance of addressing the skill gap through targeted policies and investments.
4. *Inclusive, Sustainable, and Resilient Growth*: Cambodia's development success should not solely be about achieving fast growth, but also ensuring that growth is inclusive, sustainable, and resilient. This requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond generating economic growth to address social and environmental dimensions of development.
5. *Education and Human Capital*: Boosting investments in human capital, fostering entrepreneurship, and expanding the use of technology are critical for achieving Cambodia's development goals. Reforms in education, public services, and infrastructure are needed to sustain pro-poor growth and improve competitiveness.

Along with those challenges there are policy gaps:

1. *Economic Policies*: Several policy gaps might exist in areas such as trade regulations, taxation, industrial development, infrastructure investment, and financial sector reforms. Ensuring a conducive business environment, promoting entrepreneurship, and addressing wealth inequality are often priority issues.
2. *Social Policies*: Policy gaps may be identified in the areas of education, healthcare, social protection, and poverty alleviation. These gaps might include access to quality education,

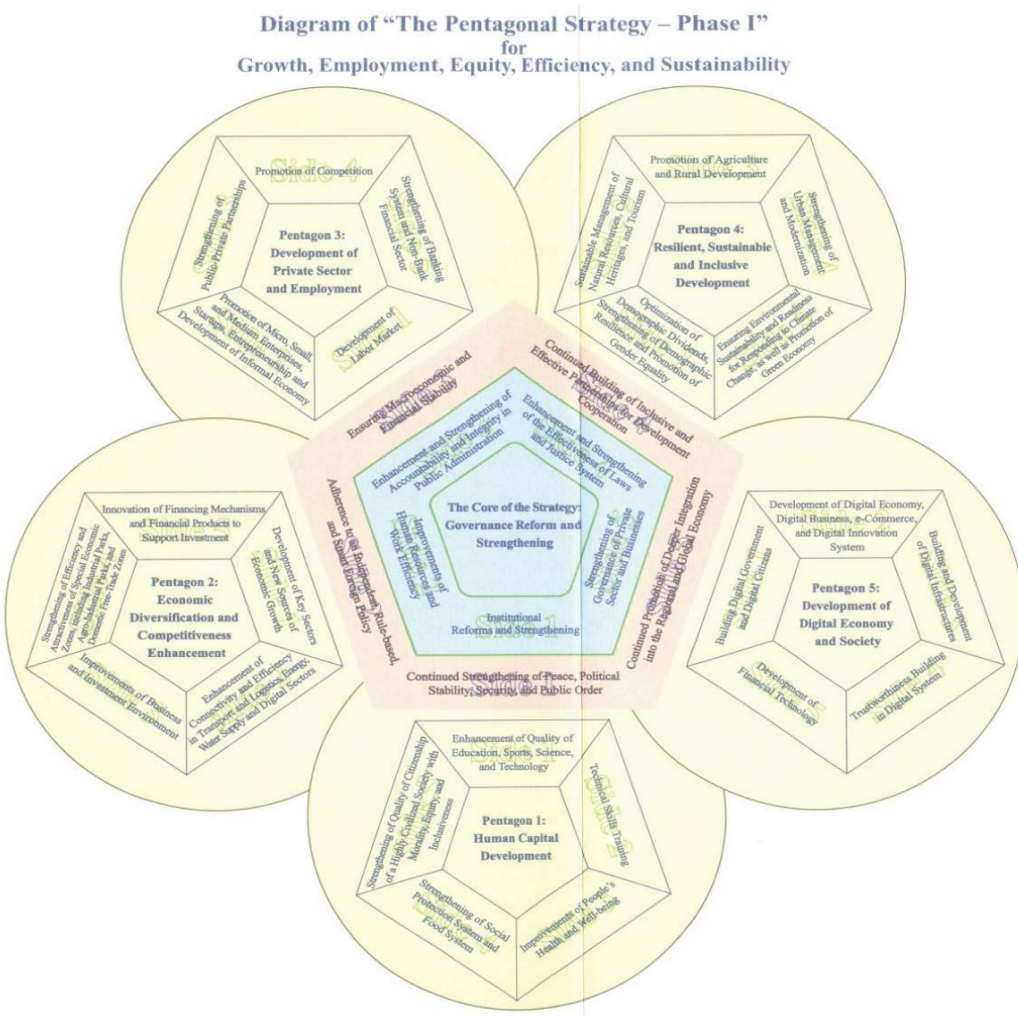
healthcare services, social safety nets for vulnerable populations, and effective poverty reduction strategies.

3. *Environmental Policies*: Given the increasing importance of environmental sustainability, policy gaps related to natural resource management, climate change mitigation and adaptation, deforestation, pollution control, and biodiversity conservation might be highlighted.
4. *Governance and Rule of Law*: Policy gaps in this area may encompass strengthening institutions, ensuring transparency, accountability, and reducing corruption. Promoting the rule of law, human rights, and ensuring access to justice are crucial as well.
5. *Rural Development*: Addressing policy gaps in rural areas is often crucial for inclusive development. This may include agricultural reforms, access to credit and market opportunities, infrastructure development, land rights, and rural poverty reduction strategies.

Addressing these challenges requires collaborative efforts from the government, civil society, and international partners. Investing in education, infrastructure, and healthcare, promoting transparency and good governance, and adopting sustainable development practices are crucial to overcome Cambodia's development challenges and ensure a better future for its people. The DPoA can address Cambodia's socio-economic development issues by providing technical assistance, grants, and loans from donors and financial institutions, as well as preferential market access and special treatments in the multilateral trading system. The DPoA also recognizes the untapped potential of creative industries in LDCs, which can offer opportunities for sustainable development, structural transformation, and job creation. The DPoA can help Cambodia better adapt to climate change, build resilience against future shocks, and eradicate extreme poverty, which are key priorities of the Pentagonal Strategy Phase 1. However, the full implementation of the DPoA will require international solidarity, mutual trust, and more investment in the productive capacities of LDCs, rather than more humanitarian aid.

3. The Pentagon Strategy

Figure 11: The Pentagonal Strategy



On August 24, 2023, the Royal Government of Cambodia unveiled the 'Pentagonal Strategy – Phase I', aimed at fostering economic growth, job creation, equity, efficiency, and sustainability over the next 25 years. The strategy was developed based on the ruling party’s “Political Platform for Nation Building and Hun Manet said that in the past 25 years, Cambodia had focused on rebuilding the country in the post-war period. The next 25 years would be a new cycle to build a strong nation towards a high-income country by 2048. The strategy has five phases, and the first phase will have five key priorities, roads, people, water, electricity, and technology. The first phase will work to ensure crisis-resilient economic growth, human capital development, economic diversification and competitiveness enhancement, labor market development, and resilient and

sustainable development. The Pentagon Strategy is a key roadmap for the government to define and implement its strategic directions and policy measures for the first time to become an upper-middle-income economy by 2030 and a high-income economy by 2048. The strategy was developed based on the ruling party's "Political Platform for Nation Building and Hun Manet said that in the past 25 years, Cambodia had focused on rebuilding the country in the post-war period. The next 25 years would be a new cycle to build a strong nation towards a high-income country by 2048.

The core of the strategy focuses on institutional reform and strengthening, improvements in human resources and work efficiency, enhancement of regional and global integration, and economic diversification and competitiveness enhancement. The first part of the Pentagon is human capital development, which focuses on education, technical skills, health, social protection, food system, and equity based on the spirit of "leaving no Cambodian citizen behind". The second part is economic diversification and competitiveness enhancement, while the third is aiming to develop the labor market and promote competition and startups. The fourth is resilient and sustainable development.

Pentagon 1 - Human capital development: 1) enhancement of quality of education, sports, science, and technology; 2) technical skills training; 3) improvements of people's health and well-being; 4) strengthening of social protection system and food system; and 5) strengthening of quality of citizenship of a highly civilized society with morality, equity, and inclusiveness.

Pentagon 2 - Economic diversification and competitiveness enhancement: 1) development of key sectors and new sources of economic growth; 2) enhancement of connectivity and efficiency in transport and logistics, energy, water supply and digital sectors; 3) improvements of business and investment environment; 4) strengthening of efficiency and attractiveness of special economic zones (SEZs), including industrial parks, agro-industrial parks, and domestic free-trade zones; and 5) innovation of financing mechanisms and financial products to support investment.

Pentagon 3 – Development of Private Sector and Employment: 1) development of labor market; 2) promotion of micro, small, and medium enterprises, startups, entrepreneurship, and development of informal economy; 3) strengthening of public-private partnerships; 4) promotion of competition; and 5) strengthening of banking system and non-banking financial sector.

Pentagon 4 - Resilient, Sustainable and Inclusive Development: 1) optimization of demographic dividends, strengthening of demographic resilience and promotion of gender equality; 2) sustainable management of natural resources, cultural heritages, and tourism; 3) promotion of agriculture and rural development; 4) strengthening of urban management and modernization; and 5) ensuring environmental sustainability and readiness for responding to climate change, as well as promotion of green economy.

Pentagon 5 - Development of Digital Economy and Society: 1) building digital government and digital citizens, 2) development of digital economy, digital business, e-commerce, and digital innovation system, 3) building and development of digital infrastructures, 4) trustworthiness building in digital system, and 5) development of financial technology.

The strategy has five phases, and the first phase will have five key priorities, roads, people, water, electricity, and technology. The first phase will work to ensure crisis-resilient economic growth, human capital development, economic diversification and competitiveness enhancement, labor market development, and resilient and sustainable development.

1. Ensuring crisis-resilient economic growth of around 7% per year on average by accelerating the diversification of economic base to create new growth pillars; promoting competitiveness; and maintaining macroeconomic stability by keeping inflation rate low, ensuring exchange rate stability, striving to steadily increase reserves, and strengthening PFM, including improving the efficiency of state assets management and sustainable public debt management.
2. Creating more jobs, both quantity and quality, for Cambodian people, especially for the youth, by strengthening the quality of education and skills trainings, hard and soft, to meet the needs of the job market; providing extensive information about the job market; improving comfortable working conditions; improving productivity; promoting trade and business; and promoting and attracting both domestic and foreign direct investments.
3. Achieving the poverty reduction targeting of below 10% and continue to keep the poverty rate to a minimum through measures to reduce economic inequality; to develop and build an integrated and consistent social protection system; and to reduce the living costs for the people; and to provide quality, efficient, and inclusive public services.
4. Continuing to strengthen capacity, governance, and improving the quality of public institutions, both national and sub-national, to ensure efficiency of public services; continuing to strengthen private sector governance; and continuing to promote a favorable environment for business, investment, and trade.
5. Ensuring sustainable socio-economic development and building resilience to climate change through optimization of demographic dividends and strengthening demographic resilience; promoting gender equality; sustainably managing natural resources; increasing sustainable and green financing in the total loans portfolios to increase financial flows to green investment and green economy; increasing climate-resilient and low-carbon public investments; and ensuring environmental sustainability and readiness for responding to climate change.

4. The Synergy Between Pentagon Strategy and Doha Programme of Actions

4.1 Investing in people in least developed countries

The synergy between the Doha Programme of Actions (DPoA) and Cambodia's Pentagonal Strategy Phase 1 in terms of investing in people is evident in their shared commitment to eradicating poverty and building capacity to leave no one behind. As noted earlier in the methodology section, the assessment of alignment of the two is purely subjective based on the extent to which the PSI and DPoA shares development strategies or priorities. Table 1 below attempts to evaluate the synergy of the two documents by mapping the priorities in the DPoA with those in the PSI.

Table 1: Investing in people: eradicating poverty and building capacity to leave no one behind

DPoA	PSI	Alignment
1.1 Universal social protection systems		A
Achieve a sustainable increase in coverage of nationally appropriate comprehensive and universal social protection systems and measures, including floors, for all in the least developed countries.	P1S4	A
End hunger and malnutrition and ensure access by all people in least developed countries, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe and healthy diets through sustainable year-round food systems.	P1S4 P1S3	A
Provide food and emergency assistance everywhere to those in need.		A
1.2 Universal access to quality education, skills and lifelong learning		P
Ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, inclusive and quality primary and secondary education, leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes and inclusive, sustainable economic growth.	P4 S1	P
By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable, inclusive and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.	P4 S1	P
Achieve universal access to inclusive and quality education at all levels, eliminate the gender gap in enrolment and completion, and increase the quality of education for all in least developed countries.	P4 S1	P
Substantially expand globally the number of places and scholarships for students and trainees from least developed countries, in particular in the fields of science, education technology, business management and economics, and encourage the full uptake of scholarships available to students of least developed countries.	P1 S1 F5 P1 S2 F5	A
Substantially increase access to the Internet, electricity, school meals that support healthy diets, water and other vital school health services, and adequate hygiene and sanitation facilities in all primary, secondary, and tertiary schools in least developed countries by 2030.	P1 S1 F54	A
Undertake feasibility studies to explore the possibility of establishing an online university or other equivalent platforms for least developed countries.	P1 S1 F5	A
Expand professional training and quality apprenticeships and promote other active labour market policies to facilitate a smooth school-to-work transition for young people, especially young women.	P1 S2 F3	A
1.3 Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls		A
Achieve women's full, equal and meaningful participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.	P4 S1 F4	A
Support women's equal opportunities in education, training, business, entrepreneurship and decent jobs.	P4 S1 F4	A
Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation.	P4 S1 F4	A
Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences.	P4 S1 F2	A

Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.	P1 S1 F1	A
Support the transition from informal to formal work in all sectors.	P3 S2	P
Achieve the full, equal and meaningful participation of women and girls online.	P4 S1	P
Achieve equitable access to social protection for women and girls.	P4 S1	P
1.4 Population and Health		A
Achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services and nutrition, and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines, diagnostics, vaccines and other health technologies for all.	P4 S4 F2	A
Reduce maternal deaths and eliminate preventable maternal, infant and child deaths and improve access to affordable quality health-care services.	P4 S3	P
Ensure birth registration to all newborns in least developed countries and provide a national legal identity to them.	P4 S1 F5	A
1.5 Investing in young people		A
Ensure, by 2030, that all young people achieve literacy and numeracy.		A
Ensure access to lifelong digital learning opportunities for skills development.	P5 S1 F7	A
Increase youth participation and inclusion in decision-making processes.	Core S1 F1	A
Increase access to safe and healthy working conditions, decent work opportunities, knowledge and skills for all young people in the least developed countries.	P3S1	P
Promote entrepreneurial training to young people, including through financial and technical assistance.	P1S2F5	A
1.6 Water, Sanitation and Hygiene		P
Achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water and access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all in least developed countries by 2030.	P2S	P
1.7 Urbanization and Shelter		A
By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport system for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport.	P4S4F4	A
1.8 Migration and mobility		A
Facilitate the orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies.	P3S1F9	A
Enhance the positive contribution of migrants to inclusive growth and sustainable development	P3S1F9	A
Invest in the skills development of migrants and facilitate mutual recognition of skills, qualification and competences.	P3S1F9	A
Ensure inclusive access to basic social (education, nutrition, health care) and protection services, in particular for migrants in vulnerable situations, in line with national policies and legislation and international obligations.		N
1.9 Good and effective governance at all levels		P
Strengthen good governance and the rule of law at all levels.	Overarching S1F2	P
Provide continued support for the strengthened and effective voice and participation of least developed countries in relevant international forums		N
Step up the fight against corruption and illicit financial flows.	Core S3	P
Build up efficient public administration institutions.	Core S2	P
Strengthen justice institutions and the rule of law.	Core S4	P
1.10 Building and sustaining peace for sustainable development		P

Build durable peace and ensure stability, security and sustainable, inclusive and resilient development in least developed countries.	Overarching S1	P
Foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies that are free from fear and violence.	Overarching S4	P
Strengthen multilateral dialogue and cooperation to prevent conflicts and ensure peaceful solutions to existing conflicts.		N
Promote increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and in mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict.		N

Notes: P=Pentagon, S=Side, F=Focus Point, N=No Alignment, P= Partially Aligned, A=Aligned

Social Protection: The two documents are well aligned in their commitment to achieving a sustainable increase in the coverage of comprehensive and universal social protection systems, ending hunger and malnutrition, and providing food and emergency assistance to those in need. The DPoA prioritizes the promotion of the concept of a social protection floor, which includes the provision of services such as health care and education, and the building of sustainable social transfer schemes. It also emphasizes the need to end hunger and malnutrition and ensure access to safe and healthy diets through sustainable year-round food systems. Additionally, the DPoA aims to substantially increase access to vital school health services, including school meals that support healthy diets, water, and adequate hygiene and sanitation facilities in all primary, secondary, and tertiary schools in least developed countries by 2030. Similarly, the Pentagonal Strategy focuses on investing in people, ensuring structural transformation, and dealing with the climate crisis, all of which are vital in assisting least-developed countries towards sustainable development. The strategy also includes priorities such as establishing an international investment support center to help least developed countries, creating a food stockholding system, and providing food and emergency assistance everywhere to those in need. The synergy between the DPoA and Cambodia's Pentagonal Strategy in terms of social protection systems is essential for addressing the needs of the most vulnerable populations, promoting sustainable development, and ensuring the well-being of all individuals in least developed countries.

Universal Access to Quality Education Skills and Lifelong Learning: The synergy between the DPoA and the PS1 in achieving universal access to quality education skills and lifelong learning is evident in their shared commitment to promoting inclusive and equitable quality education, expanding access to technical, vocational, and tertiary education, and increasing the number of scholarships for students and trainees from least developed countries. This collaboration can help Cambodia increase access to quality education, promote lifelong learning opportunities, and contribute to the socio-economic development of the country.

Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls: The synergy between the Doha Programme of Actions (DPoA) and Cambodia's Pentagonal Strategy, particularly in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, is evident in their shared commitment to promoting women's participation in decision-making processes, equal opportunities in education, training, business, entrepreneurship, and decent jobs, and eliminating

all forms of violence against women and girls. This collaboration can help Cambodia address gender disparities, promote women's empowerment, and contribute to the socio-economic development of the country.

Population and Health: The synergy between the Doha Programme of Actions (DPoA) and Cambodia's Pentagonal Strategy, particularly in achieving universal health coverage and population and health, is essential for addressing the country's socio-economic development issues. The DPoA aims to improve health systems, expand access to health services, and promote health security for all, which aligns with the Pentagonal Strategy's focus on health and well-being. The collaboration between these two initiatives can help Cambodia improve health systems, expand access to healthcare services, and promote overall health and well-being, ultimately contributing to the socio-economic development of the country.

Investing in young people: The synergy between the Doha Programme of Actions (DPoA) and Cambodia's Pentagonal Strategy, particularly in investing in young people, is essential for addressing the country's socio-economic development issues. The DPoA aims to invest in people, ensure structural transformation, and deal with the climate crisis, all of which are vital in assisting least-developed countries towards sustainable development. Similarly, Cambodia's Pentagonal Strategy emphasizes the development of human capital through education, science, and technology, as well as enhancing economic diversification and competitiveness through improved digital connectivity. This shared focus on investing in young people is essential for addressing the needs of the youth, promoting education, and fostering economic opportunities, ultimately contributing to the socio-economic development of Cambodia.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: In terms of water, sanitation and hygiene, both documents are also well aligned in their commitment to achieving universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water, as well as adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all in least developed countries (LDCs) by 2030. The DPoA aims to achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water and sanitation services, which are essential for the well-being and development of individuals in LDCs. Similarly, Cambodia's Pentagonal Strategy emphasizes the importance of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) in achieving sustainable development and promoting the human rights to water and sanitation for all. Synergy is essential for addressing the needs of the most vulnerable populations, promoting sustainable development, and ensuring the well-being of all individuals in LDCs.

Urbanization and Shelter: There are good synergies between the two in terms of urbanization and shelter. In terms of synergies between the two initiatives, acknowledge the importance of sustainable urbanization and shelter as key components of developing efficient, safe, and accessible transport systems. By incorporating measures to expand public transport networks, they seek to reduce dependence on private vehicles, minimize traffic congestion, and decrease greenhouse gas emissions. Additionally, both initiatives highlight the significance of improving road safety. The expansion of public transport networks not only provides an alternative to private vehicles but also helps to mitigate road accidents by promoting safer modes of transportation. Enhancing road safety measures, such as infrastructure development, speed control measures, and awareness campaigns, are also prioritized in both strategies.

Migration and Mobility: Both documents, to a large extent, synergize in their goals related to migration and mobility. They both emphasize the importance of facilitating orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration, enhancing the positive contribution of migrants, investing in their skills development, and ensuring inclusive access to basic social services and protection. These shared objectives portray a comprehensive approach to managing migration and striving for the overall well-being of migrants and host communities. They also focus on maximizing the positive contributions of migrants to inclusive growth and sustainable development, investing in their skills development, and promoting the recognition of their qualifications and competences. In terms of facilitating orderly and safe migration, both recognize the importance of implementing planned and well-managed migration policies.

4.2 Leveraging the power of science, technology, and innovation

Table 2: Leveraging the power of science, technology, and innovation

DPoA	PSI	Alignment
2.1 Access to modern technologies ...to reap the benefits of the IR4		A
Substantially increase investment from all sources in research and development, as well as human and institutional capacity-building, for least developed countries within an international enabling environment.	P1S1F6 P2S2F4	A
Increase investment for adequate digital infrastructure to support sustainable and inclusive digital development, including for e-learning, e-governance and e-commerce.	P1S1F4 P5 S3	A
Promote the transfer of technology on mutually agreed terms, including digital and environmentally sound technologies, to least developed countries.	P2S1F1	A
Promote the development of effective, balanced, inclusive and enabling ecosystems for innovation and creativity in least developed countries.	P5S2	P
Each least developed country will establish and strengthen a national science institute to promote local innovations, research, design and development, including in emerging technologies	P5S2	A
Move away from low value-added natural resources and low-technology products to higher value-added manufactures and higher-technology products.	P5S2	A
Build human capital through skills development, including digital skills and literacy, and expand professional competencies.	P5S1F7 P5S1F8	A
Mitigate negative impacts of emerging, new and disruptive technologies.	P5	P
2.2 Science, technology, innovation for COVID19 recovery & resilience building		P
Support the efforts of least developed countries to significantly improve their science, technology and innovation infrastructure and innovation capacities by 2031.	P1S1F4	A
Ensure universal and affordable access to and meaningful use of the Internet by all in the least developed countries by 2030.		N
Facilitate the expansion of broadband connectivity in least developed countries to bridge the digital divide.		N
Encourage investment in micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises that facilitate access to the Internet and digital services.	P3S2 P5S2	A
Promote productive capacity and competitiveness in the least developed countries through technology-driven entrepreneurship	P2S2	A
Develop competitive digital innovation ecosystems in least developed countries that are resilient to future pandemics and fit for purpose.	P5	A
2.3 Promoting private sector engagement, digitalization & broadband connectivity		A
By 2030, all people in least developed countries should have safe, affordable and meaningful digital connectivity.	P5S3	A
By 2025, broadband Internet user penetration should reach 35 per cent in least developed countries for both men and women	P5S3	A
By 2031, double broadband Internet user penetration in least developed countries to reach 70 per cent mark for both men and women	P5S3	A
Increase financing from all sources to least developed countries to support the development of domestic digital, data, and artificial intelligence infrastructure.	Overarching S4F2	A

Notes: P= Pentagon, S=Side, F=Focus Point, N=No Alignment, P= Partially Aligned, A=Aligned

Access to modern technologies ...to reap the benefits of the IR4: both documents align with each other. They emphasize the substantial increase in the investment from all sources in research and development and human and institutional capacity-building within an international enabling environment. Investment for adequate digital infrastructure is also promoted to support inclusive digital development. The two documents also aim to promote technology transfer on mutually agreed terms, including digital and environmentally sound technologies. Likewise, the development of effective, balanced inclusive and enabling ecosystem are also the targets. Both documents see the importance of the establishment and strengthening of the national science institute to promote local innovation, research, design and development, including in emerging technologies. Moving away from the value-added natural resource and low-tech products to a higher value-added manufactures and higher technology-product as well as building human capital through skill development including digital skills and literacy are aligned by the two documents.

Science, technology, innovation for COVID19 recovery & resilience building: The synergies between the DPoA and they PS1 is seen in the support provided to the effort of LDCs to significantly improve their science, technology and innovation infrastructure and innovation capacities; encouraging investment in micro-, small and medium enterprises to facilitate access to internet and digital services; promoting productive capacity and competitiveness through technology-driven entrepreneurship; and developing competitive digital innovation ecosystems that are resilient to future pandemics and fit for purpose.

Promoting private sector engagement, digitalization & broadband connectivity: The two documents are aligned well. They both emphasize the safety, affordability and meaningfulness of the digital connectivity. The DPoA and PS5S3 gives the target of 30 percent of both men and women will have access to broadband Internet by 2025, and by 2031 double broadband Internet user penetration will reach 70 percent mark for both men and women. Increasing financing from all sources to least developed countries to support the development of domestic digital, data, and artificial intelligence infrastructure is also an overarching goal of the two documents.

Table 3: Supporting structural transformation as a driver of prosperity

DPoA	PSI	Alignment
3.1 Productive capacity building		A
Generate quality employment opportunities for all and increase labour productivity by 50 per cent by 2031, with particular attention given to the integration of women, young people, and those in vulnerable situations.	P3S1	A
Substantially increase economic and export diversification with a view to reaching the level of other developing countries in export concentration by 2030.	P2	A
Promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and, by 2030, double industry's share of employment and GDP in least developed countries.	P2S1	A
3.2 Infrastructure development (transport and energy)		P
Significantly expand, upgrade and maintain and gain access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport infrastructure and national and cross-boundary connectivity and ensure that all forms of transport infrastructure are maintained through closing the missing links and strengthening institutional capacities to manage transport services.	OES5	A
By 2030, ensure universal access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy services.	P2S2	P
Double the generation of electricity per capita in least developed countries by 2030.	P2S2	P
Increase substantially the share of renewable energy in the energy mix (target 7.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals).	P2S2	A
Double financing from all sources in support of clean and renewable energy and enhance capacities in energy production, trade and distribution in least developed countries, in line with Sustainable Development Goal 7.		N
By 2030, expand infrastructure and upgrade technology for supplying modern and sustainable energy services for all.	P2S2	A
Enhance technology transfer on mutually agreed terms to least developed countries to accelerate the transition to clean and renewable energy.	P2S1F1	A
By 2030, enhance international cooperation to facilitate access to and promote investment in clean energy research and technology, as well as infrastructure, in accordance with Sustainable Development Goal 7.	P4S5	A
Fifty per cent of the annual financing flows to clean cooking and electricity access should be directed to the least developed countries.		N
3.3 Connecting LDCs to global and regional value chains		A
Significantly increase the value added and manufactured component of the exports of least developed countries, with the objective of integrating least developed countries into the regional and global value chains.	OES5	A
3.4 Support for private sector development		A

Create an enabling environment for private sector development, supporting its further alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals.	P3	A
Ensure full and equal access to financial services and products for micro-, small medium-sized enterprises, including insurance, especially for women, and improve financial and digital literacy.	P3S2F4	A

Notes: P=Pentagon, S=Side, F=Focus Point, N=No Alignment, P= Partially Aligned, A=Aligned

4.3 Supporting structural transformation

Productive Capacity: There are three key areas that both documents have the synergies. They both emphasis on the generating quality employment opportunities for all and increase labour productivity by 50 per cent by 2031, with particular attention given to the integration of women, young people, and those in vulnerable situations. PDoA and P2 also focus on the substantial increase of economic and export diversification with a view to reaching the level of other developing countries in export concentration by 2030. Both documents also aim at promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialization and, by 2030, double industry's share of employment and GDP in least developed countries.

Infrastructure Development: Both documents are partially aligned. Both document synergize the following areas such as (1) the significant expansion, upgrading and maintaining and gaining access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport infrastructure and national and cross-boundary connectivity and ensure that all forms of transport infrastructure are maintained through closing the missing links and strengthening institutional capacities to manage transport services; (2) substantial increase of the share of renewable energy in the energy; (3) expanding infrastructure and upgrading technology for supplying modern and sustainable energy services for all by 2030; (4) enhancing technology transfer on mutually agreed terms to least developed countries to accelerate the transition to clean and renewable energy; and (5) enhancing international cooperation to facilitate access to and promote investment in clean energy research and technology, as well as infrastructure, in accordance with Sustainable Development Goal 7, by 2023.

Connecting LDCs to Global and Regional Value Chains: Both document emphasis on the significant increase of the value added and manufactured component of the exports of least developed countries, with the objective of integrating least developed countries into the regional and global value chains.

Support for Private Sector Development: The main focus on the two documents are creating an enabling environment for private sector development, supporting its further alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals and ensuring full and equal access to financial services and products for micro-, small medium-sized enterprises, including insurance, especially for women, and improve financial and digital literacy.

4.4 Enhancing international trade

Table 4: Enhancing international trade of least developed countries and regional integration

DPoA	PSI	Alignment
4.1 Duty free quota free market access		A
Facilitate market access for products of least developed countries, including by developing simple and transparent rules of origin applicable to imports from least developed countries, in accordance with the guidelines adopted by WTO members at the Ministerial Conference held in Bali in 2013.	Overarching S5F6	A
Significantly increase the exports of least developed countries, with a view to doubling ⁴ their share of global exports by 2031.	Overarching S5F1	A
4.2 Preferential rules of origin		N
Ensure that preferential rules of origin applicable to imports from least developed countries are transparent and simple and contribute to facilitating market access.		N
4.3 LDC service waiver		N
Increase least developed countries' exports of services by fully implementing the WTO ministerial decision on the operationalization of the waiver concerning preferential treatment to services and service suppliers of least developed countries and encourage members that have not yet notified their preferences under the least developed countries services waiver, to also do the same		N
4.4 Technical assistance and capacity-building, including through Aid for Trade		N
Significantly increase Aid for Trade support for least developed countries, which is expected to double by 2031 from 2018 levels.		N
Ensure accession to WTO of all least developed countries committed to do so by the end of the current decade.		N
4.5 Trade related aspects of IPR		A
Support least developed countries by providing incentives to enterprises and institutions in developed country member territories for the purpose of promoting and encouraging technology transfer to least developed countries, in order to enable them to create a sound and viable technological base.	P2S1F1	A
4.6 Agriculture and cotton		N
Correct and prevent trade restrictions and distortions in world agricultural and cotton markets, including through the elimination of all forms of agricultural export subsidies and disciplines on all export measures with equivalent effect,		N

consistent with the decision taken at the WTO Ministerial Conference held in Nairobi in 2015, with a view to achieving the long-term objective of substantial progressive reductions in support and protection of agricultural products.	
4.7 World Trade Organization Agreement on Trade Facilitation	N
Fully implement the Agreement on Trade Facilitation and provide assistance in and support for capacity-building of least developed countries in this regard, in accordance with development cooperation effectiveness principles.	N
4.8 E-commerce	A
Increase the participation of least developed countries in e-commerce by strengthening ICT infrastructure and building their human and institutional capacities to better support the development of and integration into digital value chains.	A
4.9 Special and differential treatment	A
the full implementation of the provisions of special and differential treatment for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, in accordance with WTO agreements	A
4.10 Regional integration	A
regional cooperation, including trade integration and transit cooperation, can facilitate the integration of least developed countries into the global trading system.	A

Notes: P=Pentagon, S=Side, F=Focus Point, N=No Alignment, P= Partially Aligned, A=Aligned

Duty Free Quota Free Market Access: The DPoA is aligned with S5F6 and S5F1 which are on facilitating market access for products of least developed countries, including by developing simple and transparent rules of origin applicable to imports from least developed countries, in accordance with the guidelines adopted by WTO members at the Ministerial Conference held in Bali in 2013 as well as the significant increase of the exports of least developed countries, with a view to doubling their share of global exports by 2031.

Preferential Rules of Origin. There is no alignment between the two documents on ensure that preferential rules of origin applicable to imports from least developed countries are transparent and simple and contribute to facilitating market access.

LDC Service Waiver: there is no synergy between the two documents on the increasing least developed countries' exports of services by fully implementing the WTO ministerial decision on the operationalization of the waiver concerning preferential treatment to services and service suppliers of least developed countries and encourage members that have not yet notified their preferences under the least developed countries services waiver, to also do the same

Technical Assistance and Capacity Building including Aid for Trade: The two documents are not aligned in terms of significant increase of Aid for Trade support for least developed countries, which is expected to double by 2031 from 2018 levels, and ensuring the accession to WTO of all least developed countries committed to do so by the end of the current decade.

Trade Related Aspects of IPR: the two documents emphasis on supporting least developed countries by providing incentives to enterprises and institutions in developed country member territories for the purpose of promoting and encouraging technology transfer to least developed countries, in order to enable them to create a sound and viable technological base.

Agriculture and Cotton: only one of the documents emphasis on correcting and preventing trade restrictions and distortions in world agricultural and cotton markets, including through the elimination of all forms of agricultural export subsidies and disciplines on all export measures with equivalent effect, consistent with the decision taken at the WTO Ministerial Conference held in Nairobi in 2015, with a view to achieving the long-term objective of substantial progressive reductions in support and protection of agricultural products.

WTO Agreements on Trade Facilitation: fully implementing the Agreement on Trade Facilitation and provide assistance in and support for capacity-building of least developed countries in this regard, in accordance with development cooperation effectiveness principles is not aligned with the two documents.

E-Commerce: there two document emphasis on increasing the participation of least developed countries in e-commerce by strengthening ICT infrastructure and building their human and institutional capacities to better support the development of and integration into digital value chains.

Special and Differential Treatment: the two documents focus on the full implementation of the provisions of special and differential treatment for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, in accordance with WTO agreements.

Regional Integration: it well aligned by the two documents on regional cooperation, including trade integration and transit cooperation, which are able to facilitate the integration of least developed countries into the global trading system.

4.5 Addressing climate change, environmental degradation, recovery from the COVID-10

Table 5: Building resilience against future shocks for risk-informed sustainable development

DPoA	PSI	Alignment
5.1 Recovery from COVID-19, and resilience building against future shock		A
Support timely access to safe, effective and affordable COVID-19 vaccines.		A
Provide necessary support to the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) Facility and other relevant initiatives to vaccinate all eligible individuals against COVID-19 as early as possible and 70 per cent of the population in least developed countries by mid-2022, as recommended by the World Health Organization. ⁸		A
Ensure equitable and affordable access for all to safe, quality, efficacious, effective, accessible and affordable COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics.		A
Promote and encourage technology transfer on mutually agreed terms to increase production capacities of the entire supply chain of vaccines and any other health products in the regions of least developed countries.		A
Support the supply and conservation environment, and the distribution and administration and surveillance of vaccines.		A
Ensure adequate domestic and international support to strengthen inclusive social protection systems in the least developed countries, to address current poverty and vulnerability and future shocks.		A
Support awareness-raising campaigns about the benefits of COVID-19 vaccination.		A
Ensure widespread testing and tracing, maintenance and access to adequate stocks of therapeutics and personal protective equipment and ventilation equipment		A
Promote the building of strong health systems and regulatory authorities that ensure universal access to health care in the least developed countries to address current and future shocks.		A
5.2 Climate adaptation and building resilience		P
Support the full formulation and implementation of national adaptation plans, including integrated and strategic adaptation action at the national and local levels by all least developed countries, making use of the Green Climate Fund and existing initiatives such as the National Adaptation Plan Global Network and the Local Climate Adaptive Living Facility.		P

Develop and strengthen national and regional platforms and strategies for disaster risk reduction to take action to achieve the targets of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.	P
Support and reinforce, as appropriate, the existing comprehensive multi-hazard early warning system and comprehensive multi-hazard crisis mitigation and resilience-building measures for least developed countries.	P
Continue to support the development and implementation of adaptation communications, strategies and plans, including those that may be included as components of nationally determined contributions and long-term strategies under the Paris Agreement.	P

5.3 Access to finance and technology to address CC

Recognizing the outcomes of the twenty-sixth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change regarding delivering on the goal of jointly mobilizing \$100 billion in climate finance per year, scale up support for developing countries, including least developed countries.	N
The provision of scaled-up financial resources should be intended to achieve a balance between adaptation and mitigation, taking into account country-driven strategies.	N
Increase climate finance provided for adaptation and resilience, in particular for vulnerable countries, including least developed countries.	N
Continue to support the implementation of national adaptation plans and national adaptation programmes of action of least developed countries under the Green Climate Fund and other climate-relevant funds under the Global Environment Facility, including the Least Developed Countries Fund, the Special Climate Change Fund and the Adaptation Fund.	N
Increase financing for nature-based solutions or ecosystem-based approaches for climate mitigation and adaptation	N

Notes: P=Pentagon, S=Side, F=Focus Point, NA=No Alignment, PA= Partially Aligned, A=Aligned

Recovery from COVID-19, and resilience building against future shock: the two documents are aligned in the areas of (1) timely supporting the access to safe, effective and affordable COVID-19 vaccines; (2) providing necessary support to the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) Facility and other relevant initiatives to vaccinate all eligible individuals against COVID-19 as early as possible and 70 per cent of the population in least developed countries by mid-2022, as recommended by the World Health Organization; (3) ensuring equitable and affordable access for all to safe, quality, efficacious, effective, accessible and affordable COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics; (4) promoting and encouraging technology transfer on mutually agreed terms to increase production capacities of the entire supply chain of vaccines and any other health products in the regions of least developed countries; (5) supporting the supply and conservation of environment, and the distribution and administration and surveillance of vaccines; (6) ensuring adequate domestic and international support to strengthen inclusive social protection systems in the least developed countries, to address current poverty and vulnerability and future shocks; (7) supporting the awareness-raising campaigns about the benefits of COVID-19

vaccination; (8) ensuring widespread testing and tracing, maintenance and access to adequate stocks of therapeutics and personal protective equipment and ventilation equipment; and (9) promoting the building of strong health systems and regulatory authorities that ensure universal access to health care in the least developed countries to address current and future shocks.

Climate adaptation and building resilience: the two documents are partially aligned in the areas of (1) supporting the full formulation and implementation of national adaptation plans, including integrated and strategic adaptation action at the national and local levels by all least developed countries, making use of the Green Climate Fund and existing initiatives such as the National Adaptation Plan Global Network and the Local Climate Adaptive Living Facility; (2) developing and strengthening national and regional platforms and strategies for disaster risk reduction to take action to achieve the targets of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction; (3) supporting and reinforcing, as appropriate, the existing comprehensive multi-hazard early warning system and comprehensive multi-hazard crisis mitigation and resilience-building measures for least developed countries; and (4) continuing to support the development and implementation of adaptation communications, strategies and plans, including those that may be included as components of nationally determined contributions and long-term strategies under the Paris Agreement.

Access to finance and technology to address CC: the two documents are not aligned in the following areas, including (1) recognizing the outcomes of the twenty-sixth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change regarding delivering on the goal of jointly mobilizing \$100 billion in climate finance per year, scale up support for developing countries, including least developed countries; the provision of scaled-up financial resources should be intended to achieve a balance between adaptation and mitigation, taking into account country-driven strategies; (3) increasing climate finance provided for adaptation and resilience, in particular for vulnerable countries, including least developed countries; and (4) continuing to support the implementation of national adaptation plans and national adaptation programmes of action of least developed countries under the Green Climate Fund and other climate-relevant funds under the Global Environment Facility, including the Least Developed Countries Fund, the Special Climate Change Fund and the Adaptation Fund.

4.6 Mobilization international solidarity, reinvigorated global partnership and innovative tools and instruments

Table 6: Mobilizing international solidarity, reinvigorated global partnerships and innovative tools

DPoA	PSI	Alignment
6.1 Support for domestic resource mobilization & fight against illicit financial flows		P
Increase tax revenue as a proportion of GDP to at least 15 per cent in all least developed countries to enable them to become self-sustainable.		P
Enhance international cooperation for the recovery of stolen assets and their return to their countries of origin, in accordance with the United Nations Convention against Corruption.		A
Enhance intergovernmental coordination to prevent illicit financial flows.		P
6.2 International finance to contribute to sustainable development (CC)		N
Ensure the fulfilment of respective ODA commitments to least developed countries.		N
6.3 Foreign direct investment		P
Adopt and implement investment promotion regimes for least developed countries.		P
6.4 Debt sustainability and debt cancellation		P
Address the debt distress of least developed countries by 2025 and provide coordinated and appropriate debt solutions in a timely manner to all least developed countries that face debt vulnerabilities or are in debt distress, in order to work towards sustainable debt levels in all least developed countries.		P
6.5 Remittances		N
By 2030, reduce to less than 3 per cent the transaction costs of migrants' remittances.		N
Eliminate remittance corridors with costs higher than 5 per cent		N
6.6 Extension of external support to make graduation sustainable and irreversible		P
Enable 15 additional least developed countries to meet the criteria for graduation by 2031.		A
Improve the scope, where necessary, and use of smooth transition measures and incentives for all graduating least developed countries.		P
Provide specific support measures to recently graduated countries for making the graduation sustainable and irreversible.		P
6.7 Availability and use of data		P
Significantly increase the availability of high-quality, timely, reliable and disaggregated data.		P

Notes: P=Pentagon, S=Side, F=Focus Point, N=No Alignment, P= Partially Aligned, A=Aligned

Support for Domestic Resource Mobilization and Fight Against Illicit Financial Flows: the two documents are partially aligned. There is a synergy in the area of enhancing international cooperation for the recovery of stolen assets and their return to their countries of origin, in accordance with the United Nations Convention against Corruption. There is a partial alignment

in increasing tax revenue as a proportion of GDP to at least 15 per cent in all least developed countries to enable them to become self-sustainable and enhancing intergovernmental coordination to prevent illicit financial flows.

International Finance to Contribute to Sustainable Development: There is no alignment found in ensuring the fulfilment of respective ODA commitments to least developed countries.

Foreign Direct Investment: the adoption and implement investment promotion regimes for least developed countries is partially aligned with the two documents.

Debt Sustainability and Debt Cancellation: the two documents partially align in term of addressing the debt distress of least developed countries by 2025 and provide coordinated and appropriate debt solutions in a timely manner to all least developed countries that face debt vulnerabilities or are in debt distress, in order to work towards sustainable debt levels in all least developed countries.

Remittances: There is no alignment between the two documents in reducing to less than 3 per cent the transaction costs of migrants' remittances by 2030. Eliminating remittance corridors with costs higher than 5 per cent is not found either.

Extension of External Support to Make Graduation Sustainable and Irreversible: Enabling 15 additional least developed countries to meet the criteria for graduation by 2031 is found to be aligned by the two documents. However, improving the scope, where necessary, and use of smooth transition measures and incentives for all graduating least developed countries, and providing specific support measures to recently graduated countries for making the graduation sustainable and irreversible are found to be partially aligned.

Availability and Use of Data: there is partial alignment in the significant increase in the availability of high-quality, timely, reliable and disaggregated data.

5. Conclusion

Despite a lot of progress has been made, Cambodia still faces some development challenges. Addressing these development challenges requires concerted efforts from the government, civil society, and international partners to implement effective policies, promote inclusive growth, and improve social services and infrastructure across the country. Some of the key challenges include:

- *Poverty and inequality:* Cambodia has high levels of poverty and income inequality. A significant portion of the population still lives in poverty, particularly in rural areas. Income disparities between urban and rural areas, as well as within different social groups, contribute to these challenges.
- *Poor education system:* Cambodia's education system faces numerous issues, such as a shortage of qualified teachers, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to quality education, especially in remote regions. Low literacy rates and limited vocational training opportunities hinder the country's human capital development.
- *Limited access to healthcare:* Access to basic healthcare services remains a challenge, particularly in rural and remote areas. There is a lack of healthcare infrastructure, skilled

medical professionals, and affordable healthcare options. This situation hampers the overall well-being of the population.

- *Infrastructure and transportation:* Cambodia's infrastructure, including roads, bridges, and public transportation systems, needs significant improvement. Inadequate infrastructure negatively affects trade, connectivity, and economic growth in many parts of the country.
- *Environmental degradation:* Cambodia's natural resources are under pressure from deforestation, illegal logging, and unsustainable agricultural practices. Rapid urbanization and industrial development also contribute to environmental degradation and pollution, affecting biodiversity and water resources.
- *Corruption and governance:* Cambodia faces challenges related to corruption, weak governance, and lack of transparency. These issues undermine public trust, hinder private sector investments, and impede sustainable development efforts.
- *Vulnerability to climate change:* As a low-lying country, Cambodia is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, including rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and changing rainfall patterns. These challenges pose risks to agriculture, food security, and livelihoods.

The DPoA is designed to assist LDCs to overcome those challenges. Below are the potential benefits for LDCs including Cambodia by aligning the long-term development strategies such as National Strategic Development Plan with the DPoA.

- *Enhanced Market Access:* The Doha Programme of Actions prioritizes improving market access for developing countries. By aligning their plans, these countries can benefit from reduced trade barriers, increased export opportunities, and expanded market access to developed country markets. This can contribute to their economic growth and development.
- *Trade Capacity Building:* The programme emphasizes providing support and technical assistance to build the trade capacity of developing countries. Aligning strategic plans with this initiative can help these countries enhance their export capabilities, improve product quality and standards, strengthen customs procedures, and upgrade transportation and logistics infrastructure. This increased trade capacity can facilitate economic diversification and competitiveness.
- *Addressing Development Challenges:* Many developing countries face diverse challenges, such as poverty, food security, and limited access to resources. The Doha Programme of Actions aims to address these issues through initiatives like increased agricultural trade, improved access to affordable medicines, and addressing the concerns of small, vulnerable economies. Aligning development plans can help leverage the resources and assistance provided through these initiatives to tackle specific developmental challenges effectively.
- *Strengthening South-South Cooperation:* The Doha Programme of Actions emphasizes the importance of South-South cooperation, where developing countries collaborate, share knowledge, and exchange resources. By aligning strategic plans, developing

countries can actively engage in this cooperation, foster partnerships, and benefit from shared experiences and best practices. This can lead to technology transfer, capacity building, and mutual support, fostering sustainable development.

- *Enhanced Voice in International Forums:* Aligning development plans with the Doha Programme of Actions can enable developing countries to present a unified and stronger voice in international trade and development negotiations. This can enhance their influence and representation in global forums like the World Trade Organization (WTO), enabling them to advocate for their interests, address trade imbalances, and participate in decision-making processes that affect their economies.

The result of the mapping exercise between the national strategies and priorities listed down in the Cambodia's Pentagon Strategy Phase 1 and those of the DPOA in its XX key action areas within the six focus areas reveals certain alignments. However, the degree of alignment varies significantly across the six focus areas, with higher alignment observed in focus areas 1 (investing in people) and focus area 5 (addressing climate change and environmental degradation). This discrepancy can be attributed to the greater emphasis and efforts dedicated to these areas at both the international and national levels for a considerable period of time. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the other sectors are equally critical. Hence, addressing and resolving the lack of alignment between the national strategies and the DPOA strategies is essential for the effective implementation of the DPOA and ensuring the sustainable graduation of LDCs.

It is important to note that LDC countries need to carefully analyze their own context and priorities while aligning their plans with the Doha Programme of Actions in order to get maximum benefits and tailor strategies accordingly. In this regard, some specific recommendations for Cambodia can be provided as below

- *Prioritize sectors for development:* Assess Cambodia's comparative advantages and identify key sectors that align with the Doha Programme of Actions. These sectors could include agriculture, tourism, manufacturing, infrastructure, or services. Focus on sectors that have growth potential, can generate employment, and promote sustainable development.
- *Enhance trade and investment facilitation:* Streamline customs procedures, reduce trade barriers, and simplify trade-related regulations to promote exports. Encourage foreign direct investment by creating favorable business conditions, offering incentives to investors, and strengthening investor protection laws.
- *Improve infrastructure:* Invest in infrastructure development, such as transportation networks, energy systems, telecommunications, and digital infrastructure. This will boost connectivity, facilitate trade, attract investment, and promote economic growth across the country.
- *Develop human capital:* Prioritize education and skills development to enhance the capacity of the workforce. Focus on vocational training, technical education, and research and development initiatives that align with the identified priority sectors. This will help build a skilled workforce and foster innovation.

- *Promote regional integration:* Actively participate in regional integration initiatives, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other trading blocs. Foster regional cooperation, negotiate beneficial trade agreements, and promote cross-border infrastructure development to expand market access for Cambodian goods and services.
- *Strengthen institutional capacity:* Enhance the capacity and effectiveness of government agencies responsible for implementing development plans. Improve transparency, accountability, and coordination among relevant ministries, departments, and institutions. This will ensure effective implementation and monitoring of development initiatives.
- *Address social and environmental sustainability:* Consider the social and environmental impacts of development projects. Implement sustainable and inclusive policies, ensuring equitable access to benefits for all segments of society. Foster environmentally friendly practices to mitigate climate change and protect Cambodia's natural resources.
- *Engage stakeholders:* Foster inclusive and participatory decision-making processes by involving civil society organizations, private sector entities, academia, and local communities. Seek their input and feedback in the formulation and implementation of development plans, ensuring that diverse perspectives are considered.

Cambodia's Progress in Implementing the DPoA and Preliminary Elements of a Smooth Transition Strategy

*Mr. KIM Veara**

Abstract

Cambodia is set to graduate from the Least Developed Country (LDC) Status in 2029, and currently is preparing the smooth transition strategy. It is not an exception that Cambodia has negatively impacted from the COVID-19 pandemic that has caused economic slowdown and social development challenges. To help LDCs recover from the pandemic and back on track, the Doha Programme of Action (DPoA) for Least Developed Countries (LDCs), consisting of six key focus areas was adopted. Based on the review of the progress in implementing the DPoA, Cambodia has made certain progress in of the six areas. However, certain challenges still remain such as high dropout rate in the secondary education, skill gap and skill mismatch, low health coverage, lack of human resource in science, technology and technology (STI), low level of structural transformation, low level export diversification, threat of climate change and reduced ODA. Key elements for smooth transition strategy should include the integration and alignment with the Pentagonal Strategy 2024-2028 and the National Strategic Development Plan 2024-2028, while the key focus areas include maintaining macroeconomic stability, enhancing productive capacities, strengthening and modernizing existing sectors, trade expansion, promoting STI and digital economy, infrastructure development, improving business environment, alternative financing, climate change and mitigation and enhancing inclusivity and social protection.

Note: Paper submitted & presented for ESCAP “First Asia-Pacific Biennial Review of the Doha Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries” at Himawari Apartments, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, December 4-5 2024

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1. Introduction

Cambodia, located in Southeast Asia, has a total area of 181,035 square kilometers, with an estimated population of 15.7 million. Approximately 48% are male, and 52% are female, with a steady population growth rate of 1.2% (NIS, 2020). As of 2020, about 66.1% of Cambodia's population resided in rural areas, while 33.9% lived in urban areas.

Cambodia has made remarkable, sustaining an average growth rate of over 7% annually for two decades before the COVID-19 pandemic (MEF, 2023). Garments, construction and tourism are the key growth drivers have been the garment and tourism industries. Between 2004 and 2019, Cambodia's official poverty rate fell from 53% to 17.8%. However, like other countries, Cambodia has experienced economic downturn, causing a GDP contraction of around 3 percent, though recovery began in 2021. Poverty rate was also increased.

In 2022, agriculture sector contributed 21.87% of GDP, the industrial sector 37.67%, and the services sector 33.74%. GDP per capita grew substantially from \$250 in 2000 to approximately \$1,600 in 2021 and is projected to reach \$1,924 by 2023 (MEF, 2023).¹⁰⁸ Post-pandemic recovery remains uneven, with manufacturing and agriculture rebounding, but the tourism sector lagging. Cambodia also faces enduring challenges such as low productivity, insufficient human capital development, and climate change risks. Cambodia became a lower-middle-income country in 2015 and is preparing to graduate from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status in 2029 as the country has met graduation criteria twice, in 2021 and 2024 triennial reviews.¹⁰⁹

Due to COVID-19, the Doha Programme of Action (DPoA) for the decade 2022-2031, adopted at the Fifth United Nations Conference on LDCs in 2022, manifests a new generation of renewed and strengthened commitment between LDCs and their development partners, including the private sector, civil society, and the governments at all levels. Full implementation of the DPoA will help the LDCs to address the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic as well as the resulting negative socio-economic impacts, return to a pathway to achieve the SDGs, address climate change challenges, and makes strides towards sustainable and irreversible graduation. This paper explores Cambodia's implementation of the DPoA, focusing on progress, challenges, and the preliminary components of a smooth transition strategy.

2. Review of Doha Program of Action

The Doha Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries, which covers the decade 2022–2031, was adopted on 17 March 2022 by the Fifth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries. The Doha Programme of Action is the successor to the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011–2020, known as the Istanbul Programme of Action, and reflects the desire for a sustained and inclusive recovery from and greater resilience

¹⁰⁸ The author uses pre-GDP rebased data.

¹⁰⁹ The Committee conducted its triennial review of the list of least developed countries. It recommended Cambodia, Djibouti and Senegal for graduation and found that those countries require a five-year preparatory period

to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, with no one left behind. It is a set of renewed and strengthened commitments by least developed countries and their development partners.

Invest in people to eradicate poverty and build capacity: The first pillar focuses on investing in people by emphasizing the eradication of poverty and the enhancement of human capacity. By prioritizing investments in education, health, and skills development, this strategy seeks to empower individuals and communities to break the cycle of poverty. The ultimate goal is to build a society where everyone has equal access to opportunities, thereby fostering inclusive and equitable growth.

Leverage science, technology, and innovation (STI). The second pillar highlights the importance of leveraging science, technology, and innovation to address multidimensional vulnerabilities and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This strategy underscores the transformative potential of technological advancements in areas such as renewable energy, digital connectivity, and modern infrastructure.

Support structural transformation for prosperity. The third pillar emphasizes supporting structural transformation as a driver of prosperity. Structural transformation involves shifting economies from low-productivity sectors, such as agriculture, to higher-productivity sectors, including manufacturing and services. This transition is essential for fostering economic diversification, creating jobs, and improving living standards.

Enhancing international trade and regional integration. Trade plays a crucial role in economic growth by providing access to larger markets, fostering competition, and encouraging innovation. Regional integration further amplifies these benefits by enabling countries to pool resources, harmonize policies, and create economies of scale.

Climate change, environmental degradation, and pandemic recovery while building resilience against future shocks. LDCs are often the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, including extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and biodiversity loss. This strategy emphasizes the importance of implementing risk-informed policies and sustainable practices to mitigate these challenges. Additionally, recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic requires strengthening healthcare systems, ensuring vaccine equity, and addressing economic setbacks.

Mobilizing international solidarity and fostering global partnerships. Sustainable development in LDCs requires collaborative efforts from the international community, including financial assistance, technology transfer, and capacity building. This pillar advocates for innovative tools and instruments to reinvigorate global partnerships, ensuring that LDCs receive the support needed for sustainable graduation from their status as least developed.

3. Review of Cambodia Status of Graduation

The Committee for Development Policy (CDP) is mandated by the General Assembly (GA) and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to review the list of LDCs every three years and to make recommendations on the inclusion and graduation of eligible countries using three criteria,

including Income, Human Assets Index (HAI) and Economic and Environmental Vulnerability Index (EVI). Figure 1 shows the 2024 triennial reviews on Cambodia, in which the country has met the three criteria.

GNI Per Capita

Cambodia's Gross National Income (GNI) per capita, as of 2022, was \$1,590, surpassed the LDC graduation threshold of \$1,306. However, Cambodia's GNI per capita is well under that of developing countries' \$9,358. The country's economic performance has been driven by garments and footwear exports, agriculture, tourism, trade and financial services. Although Cambodia has made remarkable achievement on GNI growth during the last decades, the country remains vulnerable due to its reliance on limited export markets and products, primarily garments and agricultural commodities (World Bank, 2020).

Human Assets Index (HAI)

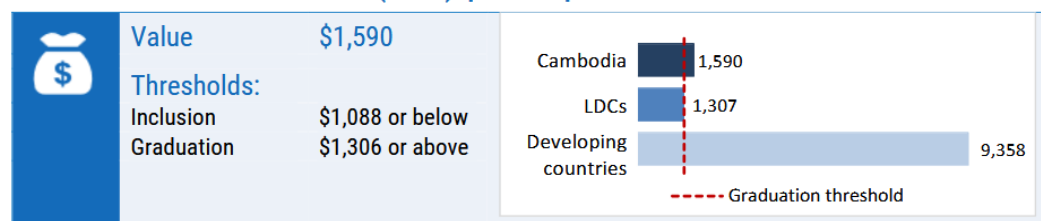
Cambodia's HAI value stands at 77.8, well over the LDC graduation threshold of 66.0. The under-five mortality rate improved to 23.7 per 1,000 live births, while maternal mortality dropped to 218 per 100,000 live births. However, child stunting remains a concern at 22.3%. Adult literacy rose to 87.8% in 2022, with gender parity achieved at the lower secondary level. Nonetheless, dropout rates in secondary education remain high.

Economic Vulnerability Index (EVI)

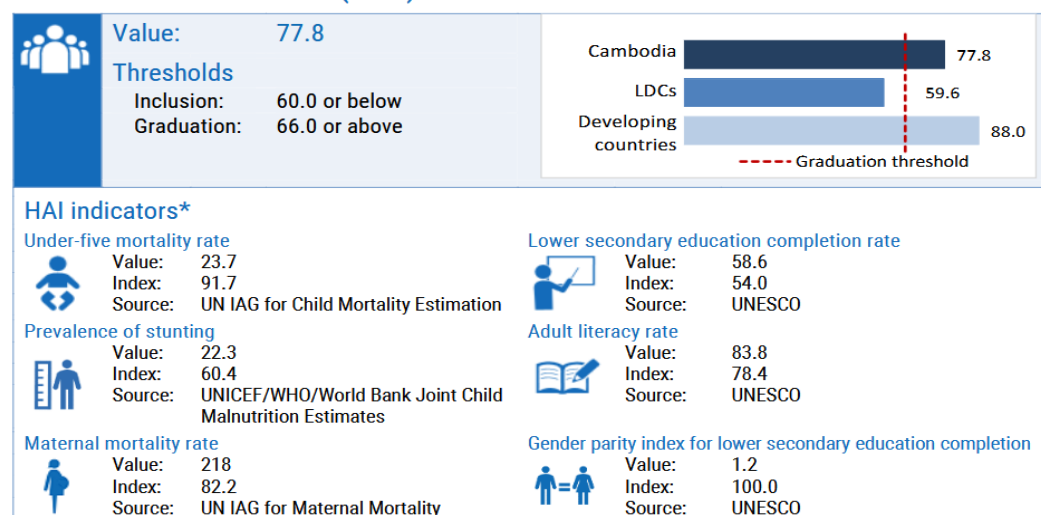
The overall EVI value is reported as 24.1, which is significantly below the graduation threshold of 32.0. This threshold signifies the benchmark for a country's economic and environmental stability, with lower values representing less vulnerability. Comparatively, Cambodia's score of 24.1 places it below both the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) average of 40.6 and the broader developing countries average of 31.9. Cambodia has made strides in reducing economic vulnerability through infrastructure development and diversification. However, challenges such as low productivity, limited technological adoption, and climate risks persist.

Figure 12: The 2024 Triennial Review

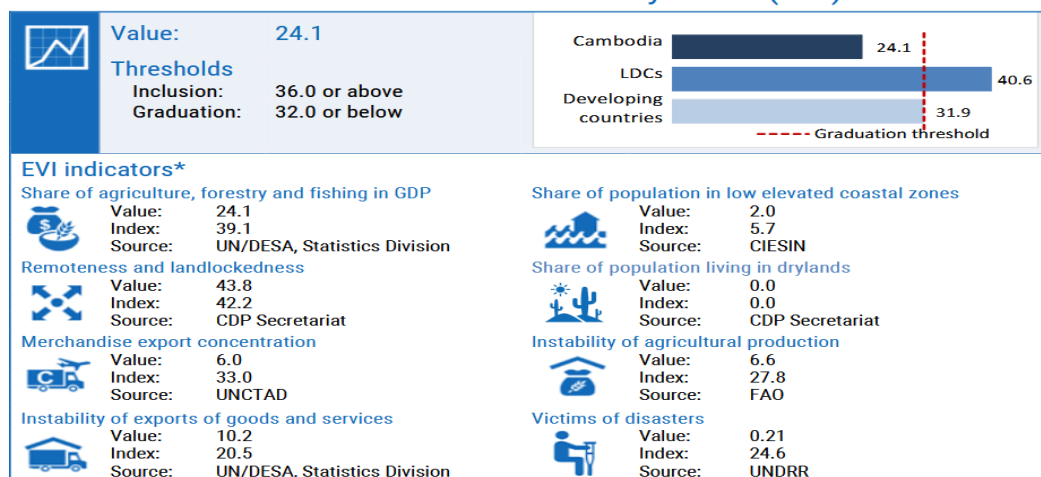
Gross national income (GNI) per capita*



Human assets index (HAI)*



Economic and environmental vulnerability index (EVI)*



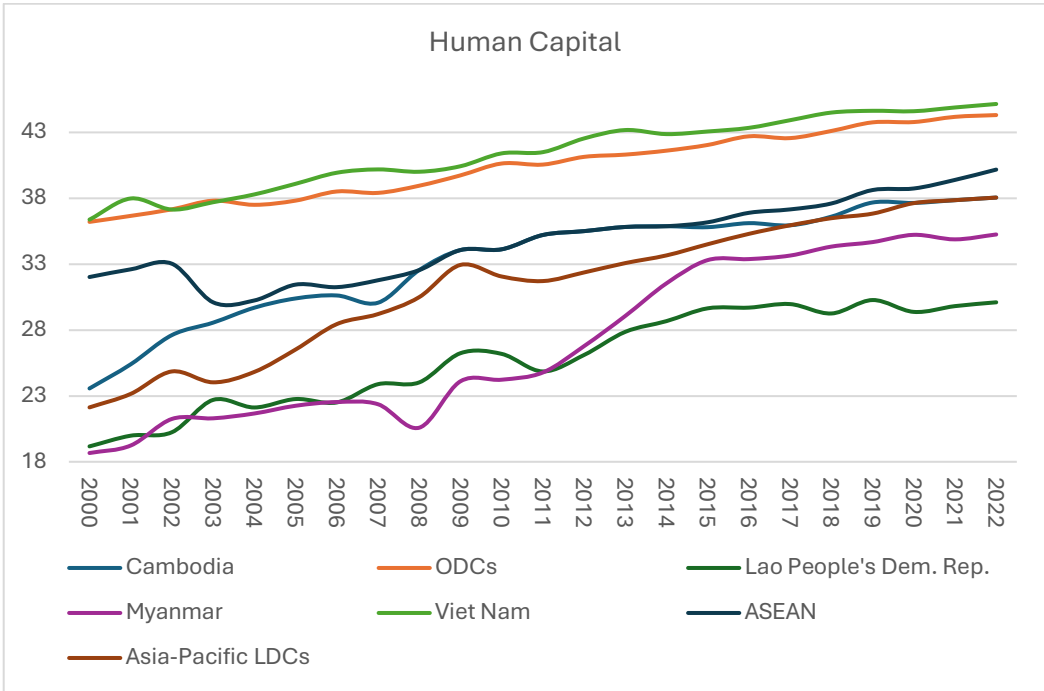
Source: CDP, 2024

3. Cambodia’s Progress Towards the Implementation of DPoA

Investing in People

Cambodia has made a gradual progress in term of human capital development. Figure 3 shows that the value of Cambodia’s Human Capital component is on par with the median of Asia-Pacific LDCs, though it was the LDCs which caught up with Cambodia since 2000. Cambodia’s score is below that of Vietnam and ODCs, as well as the median for ASEAN, higher, however, than the score of Myanmar and Lao PDR.

Figure 13: Human Capital (PCI)



Source: UNCTADstat (2023).

The completion rates in primary education increased from 82.7% in 2018 to 91.72% in 2022. Completion rates in lower secondary education grew from 46.5% in 2018 to 56.50% in 2022. The percentage of Grade 1 children who have attended Early Childhood Education (ECE) programmes decreased from 65.0% in 2018 to 55.8% in 2022. In addition, Cambodia has achieved the Gender Parity Index (GPI) level in education. The GPI of the Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) in lower and upper secondary education increased from 1.09 in 2018 to 1.17 in 2022. The adult literacy rate increased from 83.5% in 2018 to 87.8% in 2022. These achievements are derived from the efforts by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), development partners, and all stakeholders, who supported the implementation of the Education Strategic Plan 2019–2023, as well as the Education, Youth and Sport Reform Strategy 2018–2023. However, the completion rate in lower secondary education is 48.1% and reduced to 24.7% at upper secondary level. These statistics indicate that a high percentage of Cambodia’s human capital is currently outside the

formal education sector and requires alternative pathways to access education and skills development.

In this policy efforts, Cambodia has focused on modernising the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system by continuing to strengthen the quality of technical and vocational education and expand skills training. Cambodia is aiming at developing a skilled workforce characterised by high quality, professional ethics, high productivity, clear professional skills, innovation, and high competitiveness, that can meet the needs of the labour market and economic diversification policies in both domestic and overseas labour market and ensuring that “one person has at least one skill in life”.

The Government has been increasing annually the number of scholarships for Bachelor of Technology (specialisation Engineering), and related master’s and other degrees, and has provided funding for the Skills Bridge Programme, the Certificate of Skills Training Programme, Basic Education Equivalency Programme (BEEP) for online the Public-Private Partnership Training Programme, and TVET short courses that runs from 1 weeks to 4 months. In fact, from 2019 to 2022, a total of 107 public and private technical and vocational education and training institutions and NGOs under the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training trained a total of 218,012 students, including 93,436 females – in short courses: 132,281 students (63,021 females) and in long-term courses 85,731 students (30,415 females).

Over the past two decades MoEYS has implemented many different system reforms aimed at increasing enrolment rate and reducing repetition and dropout rates of students. However, the dropout rate remains high. Despite the education sector reform on track, the country continues confronting serious issues. In 2019-2020, MoEYS statistics demonstrate high student dropout rates for both sexes across the whole country and across all three levels of primary schooling, grade 1 to 6, lower secondary school, grade 7 to 9, and high school, grade 10 to 12. Dropout rates in lower secondary school are the highest among the three levels of school. Nationwide, 7.3% of children dropped out in primary school, 18.2% of children dropped out in lower secondary school, and 8.2% of children dropped out in high school.

Key challenges for human capital development remain. The first is poor education conditions and insufficient personnel competency such as (1) access to education services and the lack of expansion of the education infrastructure to ensure equity and inclusion for all children at all education levels; (2) insufficient capacity of education staff to response to the changing qualifications needs; (3) high dropout rates particularly in lower and upper secondary education; (4) and most secondary schools do not have access to science laboratories, computer labs, libraries, learning material, workshop rooms, and electricity that are required to effectively deliver the curriculum.

Second is skills gaps and skills mismatch caused by skilled labour shortages and skills gaps are acute in the Cambodian labour market due to the education and training systems that are not responsive to labour market demand. Improving the matching between the skills demand and skills supply will need further effort and resources, such as improving the relevance and quality of specific training, as well as expanding the skills training provisions across the country.

Third is underdevelopment of Technical and Vocational Education (TVET): TVET faces a number of challenges, including (1) limited understanding of the TVET value; (2) limited dissemination of information about the TVET sector; (3) dropout of students and trainees for economic reasons; (4)

TVET facilities unfavourable location and lack of accommodation for pupils; (5) limited cadre of teachers in technical subjects; (5) the quality of education not meeting the needs of the labour market; (6) limited involvement of the private sector in supporting the development of the TVET; (7) limited financial support; and (8) absence of appropriate institutional mechanisms to generate statistical information about TVET to enable adequate response.

Last is poor healthcare support as the population coverage of social health protection in Cambodia is currently 30% with nearly 54% of Cambodians having no potential coverage mechanism. The country is working toward expanding coverage; however, health service quality remains a significant challenge. Quality of care has been identified as one of the pressing imperatives in health system strengthening. Improvements in health care delivery require a deliberate focus on quality of health services. This necessitates strong governance and leadership, particularly for the development of quality management infrastructure. Moreover, external pressures and incentives can stimulate performance improvement and quality.¹¹⁰

Science, technology, and innovation (STI)

Cambodia embarked considered science, technology and innovation (STI) as the key contributor to the future sustainable growth. Cambodia's Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) Roadmap 2030 reflects a comprehensive framework to advance the country's scientific and technological capabilities to achieve its Vision 2050 and sustainable development goals. The STI Roadmap 2030 marks an important milestone in Cambodia's development journey. Recognizing the potential of science and technology as key drivers for socioeconomic growth, the Royal Government of Cambodia has integrated STI into national strategies like the *Rectangular Strategy Phase IV*, the *National Strategic Development Plan 2017–2023*, and the *Industrial Development Policy 2015–2025*. These frameworks prioritize innovation and technology adoption in key sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and the digital economy.

Progress in governance includes the establishment of institutional mechanisms like the *Ministry of Industry, Science, Technology & Innovation (MISTI)* and the *National Council for Science, Technology & Innovation (NCSTI)* in 2020. These bodies are tasked with overseeing the implementation of the National STI Policy, ensuring better coordination among stakeholders, and improving innovation governance. In addition, efforts are being made to streamline data collection on STI activities, enabling evidence-based policymaking. Monitoring systems and partnerships with the National Institute of Statistics aim to measure Cambodia's progress in innovation through indicators like the *Global Innovation Index*.

The STI Roadmap emphasizes promoting STEM education and fostering a culture of scientific inquiry from primary education onwards. Programs have been designed to equip students with digital and entrepreneurial skills, while initiatives like “*Innovation Days*” and STEM competitions aim to inspire youth towards careers in science and technology. Similarly, universities are collaborating with industries to align curricula with market needs, and efforts are underway to attract international academic talent.

Despite progress, Cambodia's STI landscape still faces significant challenges. The national innovation system is underdeveloped, with limited infrastructure and resources to foster robust scientific research and technological adoption. R&D investment remains critically low, accounting

¹¹⁰ Pheakdey, et al (2020): Improving Health Service Quality in the Kingdom of Cambodia: A Policy Perspective, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1010539520957841>

for only 0.12% of GDP in 2015. The STI Roadmap sets an ambitious target of increasing this investment to 1% of GDP by 2030, with half of this coming from the private sector (RGC, 2021). However, achieving this target requires mobilizing funding from government budgets, private investments, and international development partners.

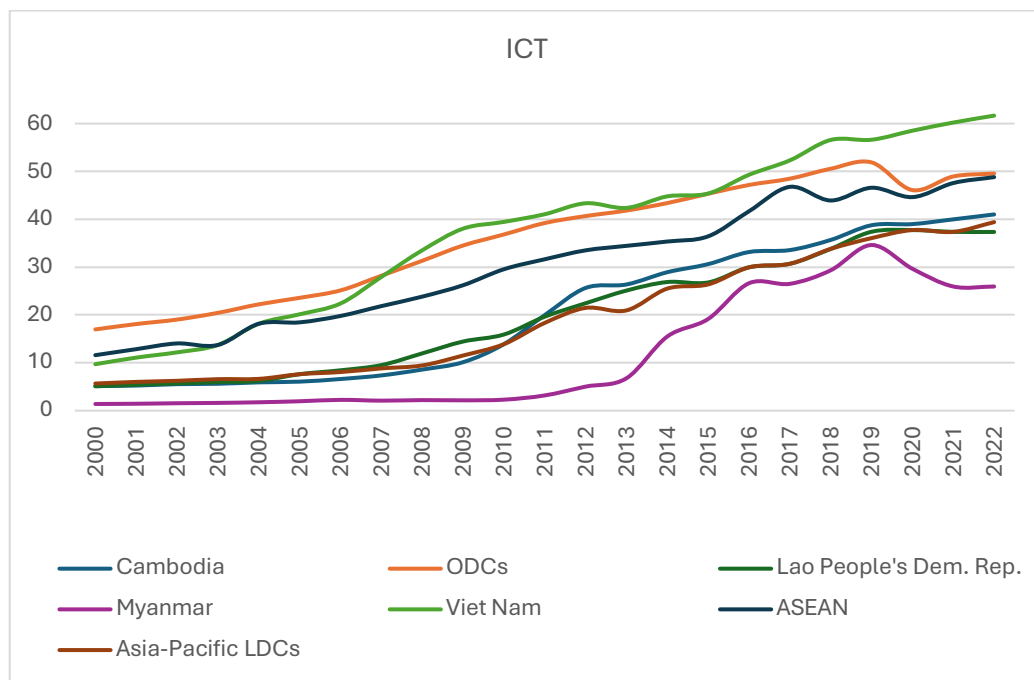
Another major challenge is human capital. The demand for innovation and scientific expertise is low, and there is limited awareness of the role of STI in economic development. The absence of a strong scientific and entrepreneurial culture inhibits Cambodia's ability to innovate. Many students and professionals lack opportunities to gain practical experience or access modern technologies due to outdated education systems and under-resourced technical and vocational education training (TVET) institutions.

Cambodia also struggles to integrate its firms, especially SMEs, into global innovation networks. SMEs often lack the capacity to absorb advanced technologies or conduct R&D, hindering their competitiveness. There is a need for stronger collaboration between universities, research institutions, and the private sector to facilitate technology transfer and improve absorptive capacities in local industries. Moreover, foreign direct investment (FDI), which could play a pivotal role in transferring technologies and expertise, remains limited in high-tech sectors.

Particularly, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure development is a key priority for Cambodia to support socio-economic development in digital and industrial revolution 4.0 era. Figure 3 shows Cambodia's PCI index for ICT has grown impressively from just around 5.5 in 2000 to 41 in 2022, overtaking Lao PDR. However, it still lags behind ASEAN's and ODCs' median and Vietnam's score. Throughout the recent years, the ICT infrastructure has been developing rapidly, increasing substantially coverage in the country, particularly in the rural and remote areas. In addition, the quality of services has been enhanced so that users can have access to the services of high quality, at affordable price, everywhere, and at any time. As of December 2022, the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications data indicated that there were 10,876 Base Transceiver Stations (BTS), 45,933km of Fibreoptic Backbone Network, and 2 Submarine Cables connected to international hubs in Hong Kong and Singapore. In the last four years, the subscribers for mobile telephone service as a percentage to the Cambodia population amounted to 138.95% in 2019 and dropped to 119.62% in 2022, while the figure of fixed phone subscribers decreased from 0.37% in 2019 to 0.24% in 2022. Furthermore, the internet subscribers as percentage of Cambodia population had been increasing steadily. For the mobile Internet service, there were 103.37% in 2019 and 107.19% in 2022, while fixed Internet broadband subscriber were 1.44% in 2019 and 2.96% in 2022 respectively.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Data provided by the Ministry of Post and Telecommunication.

Figure 14: Information and Communication Technologies (PCI)



Source: UNCTADstat (2023).

Structural Changes

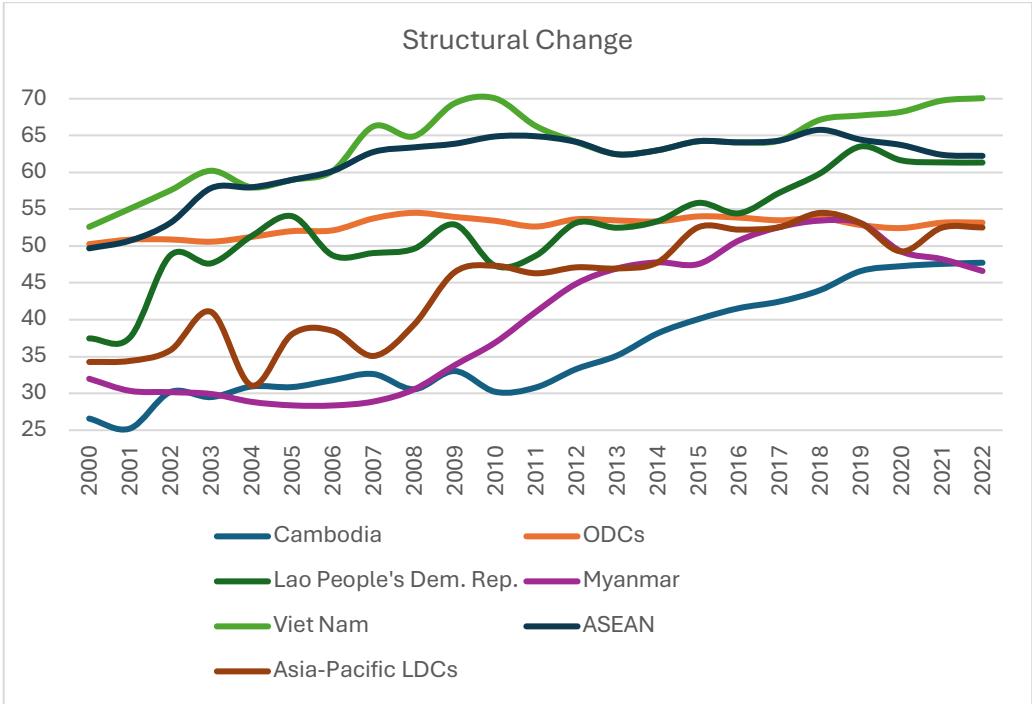
The Structural Change component of the PCI refers to the ability of a country to undergo effective structural economic transformation and the propensity a country exhibits towards the process. This is currently captured by the sophistication and variety of exports, the intensity of fixed capital and the weight of industry and services in total GDP. Cambodia has made a gradual improvement, but still comparatively low.

Cambodia's economy has been undergoing structural changes. It is driven by manufacturing and services as the twin engines of growth. The manufacturing sector accounted for 36.5% of GDP in 2019 and has shown a rising trend. There has been a rising share of services in GDP from 40% in 2010 to 41% in 2019. Although the agriculture sector has remained important, its share of GDP declined from 36% in 2010 to around 22% in 2019 as a result of the rapid industrialisation of the economy. In manufacturing activities, the textile and garment sector is dominant, accounting for a major part of production and export activities. The other key manufacturing activities concern the food processing, beverage, and tobacco sector, at around 10%. We also observe new trends in non-metallic manufacturing, transport equipment, and electronics parts and components production.

In just 20 years, Cambodia has transited from a post-conflict, aid-dependent, LDC to an economy with one of the fastest paces of GDP growth in Southeast Asia. Coming out of years of war and conflict, Cambodia had volatile growth experiences until 2010, particularly during the period of external shocks. For example, Cambodia witnessed sharp economic slowdowns during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis (AFC), the early 2000s' dotcom crash and the 2008-9 Global Financial

Crisis (GFC). But it has done remarkably well in sustaining average annual GDP growth of around 7% since recovering from its worst peacetime growth experience in 2009. This has seen its per capita GDP rapidly rise from US\$ 325 in 2000 to US\$ 1,643 in 2019 – a five-fold increase in only two decades – placing the country into the lower-middle income category of the World Bank. As a result, the poverty rate dropped sharply from 33.8 to 17.8% over the 10 years period to 2019/2020, with almost 2 million escaping poverty.¹¹² Cambodia aspires to attain upper middle-income status by 2030 and high-income status by 2050. However, the challenges to structural change remain. In addition to those mentioned in the other sections, which have clear implications for the capability of Cambodia’s structural transformation.

Figure 4: Structural Change (PCI)



Source: UNCTADstat (2023).

Lack of backward and forward linkages resulting from the foreign owned firms and FDI dominating sectors, such as garments, do not generate spillover effect into other industries. For example, a sufficient number of supporting industries for light manufacturing are missing due to the lack of competitive local entrepreneurs. Indeed, a UNDP study finds that there are no significant backward linkages for the manufacturing sector due to the lack of strong domestic industries to form linkages with multinationals.¹¹³ Negative forward linkage for the overall

¹¹² <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/11/28/pandemic-checks-cambodia-s-progress-on-poverty#:~:text=Cambodia's%20poverty%20rate%20dropped%20from,Inclusive%20and%20Resilient%20Cambodia%2C%20says.>

manufacturing sector as the sector only engages at the last stage in the GVC. There is also a significant technology gap between foreign and domestic firms.

Cambodia also has a lower rate of fixed capital formation compared to its neighbours, such as Thailand and Vietnam. The country's low savings rate has been the main contributory factor to its low capital formation, making Cambodia dependent on FDI for its industrialisation. Moreover, a nascent and underdeveloped financial sector limits Cambodia's ability to mobilise existing domestic savings for investment. Opportunities connected with commercial banks, mutual funds, or investment trusts in which to invest savings are limited. Cambodia also does not yet have a well-functioning capital market or a domestic debt market to facilitate raising of long-term funds, or to provide opportunity for the public to invest their long-term savings.

Enhancing Trade and Regional Integration

Trade integration has been the core of Cambodia's growth strategy. The country benefits from preferential trade agreements, including ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and bilateral agreements with China, Japan, and the European Union. Yet, export concentration in garments and agricultural products exposes Cambodia to external shocks. In addition, Cambodia's prospects for diversification and upgrading are challenging because of its over dependence on a few markets. Cambodia have exported five products, including garments, footwear, rice, cassava, and tourism. The five products accounted for 80 percent of Cambodia's total exports in recent years, while just two markets.¹¹⁴

Despite an impressive growth performance in recent decades, Cambodia's exports remained heavily dependent on the two destination markets. Top 5 markets, namely the US, European Union, Singapore, Japan and China imported 62 percent of the total export. In 2020, the export to the US market accounted a quarter of total exports, and 16 percent to the EU, the EU (39%, 2018) and the US (31%, 2018), making it vulnerable to changes in external consumption patterns. According to World Bank (2024), economic growth is expected to improve marginally to 5.8% in 2024, up from 5.6% in 2023, and should further strengthen by 6.1% in 2025 and 6.4% in 2026 as revival in garment, travel goods, and footwear exports and tourism propel the ongoing recovery. International tourist arrivals continued to improve in the first quarter to 84% of pre-pandemic levels. Exports of garments, travel goods, and footwear rebounded, while non-garment exports, especially of agricultural commodities, remained resilient. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region has emerged as Cambodia's second largest export market after the United States. Rising foreign investment in manufacturing and agriculture also contributed to the recovery.

While Cambodia has been able to attract a few pioneer producers of bicycles, electrical appliances (e.g., Minibea), and auto parts (e.g., Denso, Sumi Wiring System), it has not been able to form industrial clusters in these value chains, and therefore export diversification remains limited. Furthermore, there are signs that FDI into the manufacturing sector has slowed significantly in recent years. From the demand side, the main barriers to the expansion and diversification of manufacturing is the lack of scale due to a small domestic market. Most of the Cambodia's industrial, including manufacturing, establishments are SMEs. In 2011 almost 91% of industrial

¹¹⁴ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/01/31/productivity-diversification-domestic-investment-are-key-to-cambodia-s-economic-recovery>, retrieved on 30 December 2023

enterprises were micro establishments and only 1.5% were medium or large companies, accounting for 35% of industrial employment. From the supply side, the main barrier is low productivity.

Cambodia's inability to grow the product basket is explained by low labor productivity, or output per worker, which lags behind most countries globally when at Cambodia's development level (World Bank, 2021). Low labor productivity, at least in part, reflects low human capital. Key factors causing this are the inadequate level of skills among workers and the low quality of general education to produce a skilled labour force, and low enrolment in the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) centres. Consequently, low levels of human and physical capital manifest themselves in low productivity.

In the longer term, Reinforcing efforts to address structural challenges and build resilience to external shocks is key consideration for Cambodia. Key priorities include upgrading human capital through education and skills development, improving the investment climate, and reducing logistic costs through infrastructure development and digitalization. The implementation of structural reforms under Cambodia's Pentagonal Strategy will be vital for enhancing competitiveness and achieving sustainable growth. By embracing a green transition, Cambodia can seize new opportunities, strengthen its economy, and build resilience to the growing impacts of climate change.

Addressing Climate Change and Pandemic Recovery

Cambodia faces significant challenges and opportunities in achieving its development goals while addressing the impacts of climate change. According to the World Bank's recently released Cambodia Country Climate and Development Report (CCDR), the country's path forward can be summarized by the "three Rs": reducing exposure and vulnerability to climate change, realigning its emissions trajectory, and reorienting its economy to seize opportunities in the global green transition.

Climate change is already having visible effects on Cambodia, with increasing variability in rainfall patterns causing frequent and intense droughts and floods. Cambodia remains highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change due to its high dependency on climate-sensitive sectors such as agriculture, water resources, forestry, fisheries, tourism, etc., which form the critical foundation of its economic growth and support the livelihoods of a significant majority of its population. Notable events include the severe drought of 2015–2016, which affected 18 of 25 provinces and impacted 2.5 million people, as well as the flooding in September 2022 that displaced 5,000 households and impacted 85,000 others. The economic consequences of these climate events are severe, with rice production losses due to the 2019 El Nino drought estimated at \$100 million. Looking forward, climate projections indicate worsening flood risks, heat stress, and other related effects.

Projected climate change trends indicate more severe floods and droughts, which is expected to affect Cambodia's GDP by nearly 10% by 2050 and increase the poverty rate by as much as 6 percentage points by 2040 (World Bank, 2021). To address these challenges, Cambodia must invest

in improving its climate resilience while sustaining economic growth. For instance, government-led adaptation measures could include strengthening the climate resilience of critical infrastructure, such as road networks, schools, and healthcare facilities. At the same time, private sector actions, such as investing in energy-efficient cooling systems and flood-resilient buildings, could play a crucial role in mitigating the impacts of climate change.

Despite being historically a low emitter of greenhouse gases, Cambodia currently has the fastest emissions growth rate in Southeast Asia and one of the highest carbon intensity rates among its peers. Addressing these issues requires significant efforts to realign the country's emissions trajectory. Achieving Cambodia's pledge of carbon neutrality by 2050 will require reversing deforestation, promoting clean energy solutions, and steering key sectors like energy, transport, and industry onto a lower-carbon path. Encouragingly, Cambodia has made notable progress in adopting renewable energy solutions. The share of solar energy in Cambodia's installed power generation capacity has grown significantly, rising from near zero in 2016 to 12.5% in 2021.

The Royal Government of Cambodia launched the first Climate Change Strategic Plan 2014-2023 (CCCSP) in 2013. The CCCSP captures the main strategic objectives and directions for climate-smart development in Cambodia over the next 10 years. Cambodia submitted its Initial Nationally Determined Contribution in 2016 and submitted its Updated Nationally Determined Contribution in December 2020, which established the country's commitment to its mitigation and adaptation efforts. These documents build synergies with existing government policies to ensure strategic cohesion to address a wide range of climate change issues linked to adaptation, greenhouse gas mitigation, and low-carbon development.

Cambodia's Second National Communication to the UNFCCC (NC2) (2016) identifies the impacts of climate change in Cambodia upon human lives and the expected significant damage to economic development and natural resources. These include intensified floods, droughts, saline intrusion and extreme weather events. The country is also committed to meeting its greenhouse gas emission targets and ensuring appropriate mitigation and environmental management efforts across key sectors. Current emissions projections indicate that the Forestry and Land Use sector is expected to have 49.2% of sectoral emissions by 2030, followed by Energy at 22.2%, Agriculture at 17.5%, Industry at 9.0% and Waste at 2.1%. Cambodia's NC2 outlines its measures to mitigate and adapt to climate change and related plans, programs and projects in these areas; financial commitments, technology transfer and international cooperation; systematic research and observation; education, training and public awareness; and constraints, gaps and related financial, technical and capacity needs.¹¹⁵

Cambodia has shown a positive recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. ADB (2024) maintains its growth forecast for Cambodia at 5.8% for 2024 and 6.0 for 2025.¹¹⁶ This growth is expected to be driven by a rebound in the garment sector, sustained growth in non-garment manufacturing, and

¹¹⁵ Cambodia (2016). Cambodia's Second National Communication submitted under the UNFCCC. URL: <https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/khmnc2.pdf>

¹¹⁶ <https://www.adb.org/news/adb-maintains-cambodia-growth-forecast-2024-2025>

a recovery in tourism. While garment exports and real estate remained weak in 2023, the non-garment manufacturing sector—including exports of solar panels, vehicle parts, and electrical components—has shown strong momentum. Inflation, which peaked in 2022, declined to an average of 2.1% in 2023 and is expected to remain stable at 2.2% in 2024 and 2.3% in 2025. However, Cambodia’s growth outlook is subject to significant risks, including slower economic growth in major trade partners such as China, the U.S., and Europe, as well as rising global commodity prices and potential trade policy shifts.

Domestically, the Cambodian banking sector faces rising risks due to increasing non-performing loans (NPLs), particularly in sectors such as real estate, hotels, and wholesale trade. The World Bank warns that a faster-than-expected increase in non-performing loans could affect macro-financial stability.¹¹⁷ While the banking sector remains broadly resilient, a further weakening of the real estate sector could exacerbate credit risks and create financial distress for some developers. Additionally, Cambodia’s long-term growth potential could be constrained by the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly disruptions in education and weakened business balance sheets.

To address these challenges, the government must prioritize fiscal consolidation to rebuild policy space, improve spending efficiency, and enhance revenue collection. Reallocating resources to key priorities such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure will be critical to boosting growth potential and achieving long-term development goals. Enhancing financial sector stability is also essential. Key measures include normalizing post-pandemic forbearance policies, strengthening capital adequacy frameworks, and introducing a deposit insurance scheme to protect depositors. Additionally, improving oversight of the real estate sector and mitigating risks associated with shadow banking activities are critical for ensuring financial stability.

Mobilizing International Solidarity

International partnerships have been critical for Cambodia’s development. Development aid and technical assistance continue to support health, education, and infrastructure projects. Cambodia must ensure a smooth transition post-LDC graduation to avoid disruptions in aid and preferential trade treatments.

Cambodia has made remarkable progress in mobilizing and managing financial resources, especially Official Development Assistance (ODA). Between 2019 and 2022, the volume of ODA accounted for approximately \$2 billion annually, contributing significantly to the country’s socio-economic development. The ratio of ODA to GDP was 9.1% in 2020, which slightly declined to around 7.0% in the following years due to economic recovery post-COVID-19 (RGC, 2023b). However, disbursements exceeded USD 1 billion from 2019 onward, reaching USD 1.51 billion in 2021. Between 2010 and 2018, grants accounted for an average of over 60% of total ODA. The share of grants declined from 83.0% in 2010 to 65.3% in 2018, further dropping to 41.6% in 2021. This trend aligns with Cambodia’s transition to a lower-middle-income economy.

¹¹⁷ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/cambodia/overview>

One of the key strategies that facilitated this achievement was the Development Cooperation and Partnership Strategy (DCPS) 2019–2023. This strategy aligned with the national development goals articulated in the Rectangular Strategy Phase IV (RS-IV) and the National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) 2019–2023. According to VNR 2023, as a result of these coherent policies, Cambodia successfully mobilized \$8.4 billion in ODA against the NSDP’s requirement of \$6 billion for the period of 2019–2022.

Significant investments were channelled into infrastructure and ICT development, with an average of \$696 million and \$276 million per annum, respectively, being allocated to these sectors. These investments underline the government's priority in supporting socio-economic development through improved infrastructure, particularly in rural and remote areas, enhancing the quality and accessibility of services (RGC, 2023).

Cambodia has fostered strong partnerships with the private sector and civil society organizations (CSOs). Platforms such as the Government-Private Sector Forum and the Cambodian Chamber of Commerce have played pivotal roles in addressing private sector concerns and promoting entrepreneurship. Moreover, CSOs have been actively engaged in the SDG implementation process, contributing to advocacy, research, and capacity-building activities related to sustainable development (RGC, 2023).

Despite these achievements, Cambodia faces several challenges in fully realizing the objectives for mobilizing international solidarity. These challenges are multifaceted, involving financial, technological, and governance-related issues. Cambodia’s reliance on ODA remains a significant challenge, particularly in the context of its impending graduation from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status. This transition is expected to result in a gradual decline in grant-based ODA, which has been a critical source of funding for many development projects. The reduction in ODA is anticipated to affect Cambodia’s ability to finance its ambitious development goals, requiring the government to seek alternative financing mechanisms, such as increased ODA loans and private investment (RGC 2023b; 2019).

To address these challenges and accelerate progress on this sixth DPoA, Cambodia has outlined several strategic directions. Given the anticipated decline in ODA, Cambodia must focus on enhancing domestic resource mobilization. This includes improving tax collection mechanisms, broadening the tax base, and ensuring efficient public expenditure management. Strengthening public financial management reforms will be key to aligning financial resources with national development priorities and ensuring the sustainability of development efforts (RGC, 2019). Moreover, encouraging innovation and further engaging the private sector are critical for sustaining economic growth and achieving SDG 17. The government needs to create an enabling environment that supports entrepreneurship, technological innovation, and private investment. This includes developing policies that facilitate access to finance, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and promoting public-private partnerships in critical sectors such as infrastructure, education, and health (RGC, 2023b).

Building strong multi-stakeholder partnerships is essential for the successful implementation. The government should continue to engage with development partners, CSOs, and the private sector to ensure that all stakeholders contribute to and benefit from sustainable development initiatives. Strengthening the capacity of these partnerships and ensuring their alignment with national priorities will be crucial for achieving long-term development goals (RGC, 2019). Investing in data and monitoring systems is vital for tracking progress and ensuring accountability in SDG implementation. Cambodia needs to prioritize the development of robust data systems that can provide accurate, timely, and disaggregated data across all SDG indicators. This will require continued support for the NIS and other relevant institutions, as well as collaboration with international partners to adopt best practices in data management (RGC, 2019).

4. Expected Impacts on LDG Graduation

Preferential Tariffs

Currently, Cambodia benefits from duty-free and quota-free market access to major destinations like the European Union (EU) through the Everything But Arms (EBA) initiative and other trade preferences provided to LDCs. Key export sectors such as garments, rice, and bicycles, which accounted for 28.6% of total exports in 2022, will face significant challenges after graduation. The EU and Canadian markets, representing 29.4% of total exports, will impose higher tariffs.

- In the EU, tariffs will rise from 0% under EBA and GSP+ to 8.8% under the standard GSP and 11.5% under Most-Favored Nation (MFN) rates. Specific rates will increase for bicycles (10.1%) and other cycles (14.5%).
- For Canada, exports will no longer qualify for zero tariffs under the LDC preferential tariff scheme (LDCT). Garments, textiles, footwear, and travel goods will face tariffs of up to 16.1% under GPT and 16.4% under MFN rates, while bicycles will see tariffs of 8.5% and 13%, respectively, and other products will face rates of 2.4% and 5.5%.

Stricter Rules of Origin

Graduation will subject Cambodia's exports to stricter rules of origin requirements in markets like the EU, UK, and Canada. The minimum local value-added threshold for preferential treatment will increase from 30% to 60%. Non-compliance will result in higher MFN tariffs. In the garment sector, double transformation will be required for preferential access, replacing the previous single transformation rule under the EU's GSP for LDCs.

Loss of WTO Privileges

Cambodia will lose access to LDC-specific benefits under WTO rules, retaining only general special and differential treatment for developing countries.

- Cambodia will no longer enjoy extended transition periods for compliance with the WTO Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), which LDCs are exempt from until July 2034.
- Exemptions under the Agreements on Agriculture and Subsidies and Countervailing Measures will end, requiring Cambodia to eliminate export subsidies.

- Standard rules for Trade-Related Investment Measures (TRIMs) will apply, necessitating the removal of non-conforming measures like local content requirements.
- Cambodia may face less favorable terms in the WTO dispute resolution process.

Reduced Development Cooperation

Cambodia's access to development assistance will decline, transitioning from grant-based funding to less concessional loans. This will likely increase the debt-servicing burden.

- Loss of Official Development Assistance (ODA) in the form of grants and concessional loans will lead to a shift toward higher-interest financing.
- Debt relief opportunities will diminish, and Cambodia will no longer benefit from LDC-specific caps and discounts on contributions to international organizations or support for participation in global meetings.
- While the direct impact of ODA on GDP might be limited, the broader implications for funding and international support could be significant.

5. Action to be Considered for Smooth Transition

Aligning the National Strategy and NSDP with the STS and DPoA

Aligning the National Strategy, the National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP), and the Sustainable Transition Strategy (STS) with the Doha Programme of Action (DPoA) is critical. The Pentagonal Strategy Phase I (2024–2028) serves as a comprehensive framework, which also accelerates the progress of DPoA implementation, focusing on key priorities that underscore human capital development, economic resilience, technological advancement, and social inclusion.

Enhancing Human Capital. The first angle of the Pentagonal Strategy lies in enhancing human capital. This priority recognizes that an educated and skilled workforce is fundamental to achieving national prosperity. Investments in education, healthcare, and vocational training aim to equip citizens with the competencies required to thrive in a competitive global landscape. By fostering innovation and cultivating talent, the strategy not only aligns with the STS but also addresses the core objectives of the DPoA to uplift vulnerable populations through improved access to resources and opportunities.

Economic Diversification. Cambodia has low economic diversification and enhancing this is imperative for reducing reliance on traditional sectors and building resilience against global market fluctuations. Through targeted policies and initiatives, the strategy seeks to nurture emerging industries such as technology and digital economy, green energy, and higher value-added manufacturing in addition to the existing industry such as garments and tourism. This approach aligns with the STS's emphasis on sustainability and the DPoA's call for economic transformation to mitigate vulnerabilities and foster inclusive growth.

Expanding Trade Markets. Similarly, to economic diversification, expanding trade markets is essential for integrating the national economy into the global value chain. By enhancing export capabilities and forming strategic trade partnerships, the strategy aims to create new opportunities

for local businesses and promote economic growth. This priority complements the DPoA's focus on enhancing the export potential of least developed countries and ensuring equitable participation in international trade.

Attracting Foreign Investment. Attracting foreign investment is a pivotal aspect of the strategy, driving economic growth and technological transfer. By creating a conducive environment for investors through policy reforms and infrastructure development, the strategy seeks to boost investor confidence and generate employment opportunities. This aligns with the DPoA's goal of fostering international cooperation and investment in developing economies.

Advancing Science, Technology, and Innovation. Advancing science, technology, and innovation (STI) is integral to addressing contemporary challenges and seizing opportunities in the digital age. The Pentagonal Strategy prioritizes research and development, digital transformation, and the adoption of cutting-edge technologies. This focus aligns with the STS and DPoA, highlighting the role of STI as a driver of sustainable development and a tool for bridging disparities.

Strengthening Social Support Mechanisms. Finally, strengthening social support mechanisms ensures that no one is left behind in the journey toward development. By enhancing social safety nets, promoting gender equality, and supporting marginalized communities, the strategy addresses the social dimensions of the STS and DPoA. This holistic approach fosters social cohesion and resilience, ensuring equitable progress across all segments of society.

Focus on Key Priority Areas

To further bolster national development, the strategy emphasizes several key priority areas:

Macroeconomic Stability. Maintaining macroeconomic stability is critical to fostering a predictable and robust economic environment. Policies that ensure fiscal discipline, control inflation, and stabilize exchange rates are essential for building investor confidence and promoting sustainable growth.

Structural Transformation and Productive Capacities. Structural transformation focuses on shifting the economy toward higher-value sectors, enhancing productive capacities, and fostering industrial growth. This requires strategic investments in technology, innovation, and workforce development to achieve long-term economic resilience.

Strengthening and Modernizing Existing Sectors. Modernizing traditional industries and strengthening existing sectors ensure that they remain competitive in a rapidly changing global economy. By integrating advanced technologies and improving operational efficiencies, these sectors can contribute more significantly to national GDP and job creation.

Trade Expansion. Expanding trade through frameworks such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and bilateral agreements is a strategic priority. Addressing technical standards and compliance issues further facilitates access to international markets, boosting exports and fostering economic integration.

Education and Skill Development. Education and skill development are pivotal for preparing the workforce for emerging industries and technologies. Tailored training programs, enhanced curricula, and partnerships with industry leaders are necessary to align educational outcomes with market demands.

Promoting STI and Leveraging the Digital Economy. Promoting science, technology, and innovation (STI) and leveraging the digital economy are critical for driving growth and competitiveness. Investments in digital infrastructure, research, and entrepreneurship provide a foundation for a knowledge-based economy.

Infrastructure Development. Infrastructure development supports all other priority areas by enabling efficient transportation, communication, and energy systems. Investments in resilient and sustainable infrastructure are essential for fostering economic activity and improving quality of life.

6. Roles of UN System in Helping Cambodia Development Smooth Transition Strategy

Capacity Development and Institutional Strengthening

Key organizations, such as the United Nations Cambodia Resident Office (UNRCO) the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) are key players to provide technical assistance aimed at enhancing governance structures and building robust institutional frameworks. This cooperation ensures that Cambodia is equipped with the necessary tools and systems to navigate the complexities of the transition process. Simultaneously, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) is providing support in policy research and development. By integrating Cambodia's smooth transition strategy into its national development plans, ESCAP's initiatives ensure alignment with broader developmental goals such as the SDGs.

Workshops and Training

ESCAP is the key player in organizing and/or assisting the multistakeholder workshops. These workshops bring together government officials, private sector representatives, and civil society members to foster a collaborative approach to transition planning. Through these sessions, participants gain insights into best practices, technical skills, and innovative solutions tailored to Cambodia's specific needs. In addition to workshops, peer-to-peer learning initiatives are being facilitated, enabling stakeholders to exchange experiences and strategies with counterparts from other nations that have undergone similar transitions. This collaborative knowledge-sharing approach strengthens Cambodia's readiness and adaptability.

Analytical and Advisory Support

Analytical and advisory support play a critical role in addressing Cambodia's economic vulnerabilities and structural constraints. UNDESA and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) are conducting in-depth analyses to identify development needs and formulate actionable strategies. To guide decision-making, the Committee for Development Policy

(CDP) is providing substantive support to ensure that Cambodia's transition strategies align with broader United Nations (UN) and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) frameworks. Moreover, UNCTAD's proposal to prepare an "elements paper," similar to the one developed for Bhutan, represents an innovative roadmap for Cambodia's transition.

Innovative Financing, Scholarships, and Education Support

Transitioning smoothly requires access to innovative financing mechanisms and support for education. Collaborative efforts will focus on establishing financial models that address Cambodia's unique economic landscape. Scholarships and educational initiatives are also vital, as they build human capital and provide the skills needed to sustain progress post-transition. Such investments in education and capacity-building ensure that the workforce is equipped to meet future challenges.

Monitoring and Evaluation

ESCAP, CDP, and UNDP are assisting in the development of these frameworks, which will provide critical insights into Cambodia's achievements and areas needing improvement. Additionally, long-term advisory services are planned to ensure that the progress made during the transition is sustainable. These services include post-graduation support to address emerging challenges and maintain momentum toward development goals.

7. Conclusion

Cambodia has made a certain progress in implementing DPoA. Over two decades, it has transitioned from a post-conflict economy to one of Southeast Asia's fastest-growing economies, characterized by reductions in poverty, significant advancements in human capital, and structural economic transformation. Notable achievements include increases in GDP per capita from \$250 in 2000 to \$1,875 in 2023, improvements in literacy and education completion rates, and enhanced regional integration through trade agreements.

However, critical challenges remain, such as inadequate technical education systems, low productivity, and the vulnerability of key economic sectors to climate change impacts. High dropout rates and skills mismatches underscore the need for a comprehensive overhaul of the education and vocational training systems. Cambodia's heavy reliance on a narrow export base and external markets further underscores the urgency for diversification.

Cambodia's impending graduation from LDC status presents both opportunities and challenges. The loss of preferential trade benefits and reduced access to concessional financing necessitates strategic adjustments. In accordance with the Pentagonal Strategy Phase I, the STS should prioritize human capital development, trade expansion, economic diversification, and infrastructure improvements to ensure a smooth transition. Collaboration with international partners, robust governance mechanisms, and targeted investments in education, healthcare, and climate resilience will be critical to sustaining progress. Cambodia's commitment to the SDGs and climate neutrality by 2050 reflects its vision for a resilient and inclusive future.

Recommendations

1. **Strengthen Education and Skills Development:** Enhance technical and vocational education and training (TVET) to align with labor market demands. Address high dropout rates by expanding infrastructure and access to secondary and tertiary education, particularly in rural areas. Increase investments in STEM and digital skills to build a competitive workforce.
2. **Promote Economic Diversification:** Reduce dependence on garments and agriculture by promoting industrial and services sector growth. Develop domestic industries to establish backward and forward linkages, enhancing integration into global value chains. Encourage SMEs to adopt advanced technologies.
3. **Enhance Climate Resilience:** Implement risk-informed policies to address vulnerabilities to floods, droughts, and other climate impacts. Expand renewable energy adoption and strengthen infrastructure to mitigate climate risks. Leverage international partnerships to access green financing and technology transfers.
4. **Expand Trade and Regional Integration:** Diversify export markets and products to mitigate external shocks. Strengthen compliance with international trade standards and negotiate favorable terms under new trade agreements post-graduation. Cambodia's at the verge of losing ISMs. Bilateral trade agreements should be focused.
5. **Mobilize Resources for Development:** Enhance domestic resource mobilization through improved tax collection and public financial management. Encourage private sector participation and develop public-private partnerships for infrastructure and social development projects. Amid declined ODA, Cambodia should look at alternative sources of financing through innovative financing approaches.
6. **Strengthen Governance and Partnerships:** Enhancing the SDG17 would result in promoting inclusive governance by engaging stakeholders from government, civil society, and the private sector. Strengthen monitoring and evaluation frameworks to ensure accountability and alignment with national development priorities.

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