

# Cambodian Civic Participation and COVID-19\*

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## INTRODUCTION

With thousands of organizations working throughout Cambodia on a wide range of issues, Cambodian civil society observed first-hand how the health crisis posed by the COVID-19 pandemic translated into economic and other challenges. East-West Management Institute (EWMI) research shows that the economic effects of the pandemic are top of mind for Cambodians. Unfortunately, other challenges to promoting civic engagement as it became more difficult to gather citizens to participate in democratic processes made it more difficult for civil society to contribute to positive solutions.

Civil society actors responded to these challenges in several ways:

- Assessed concerns of citizens and their interest in civic participation
- Pivoted to health issues
- Worked with smaller groups of citizens while seeking to support remaining citizens who were still interested in civic participation.

## CONTEXT

In the wake of COVID-19, Cambodians face many pressing and complex challenges to their economic and social well-being as well as to their health. Just as the health crisis has led to economic challenges, COVID-19 has made it more difficult to promote civic participation.

Today we are hearing from representatives of major United Nations (UN) agencies and academia, with many presenters having close ties to the business community. I appreciate the opportunity to add insight from Cambodia's civil society as well.

The term civil society is used in many different ways, so I will take a moment to clarify the scope of this discussion. Civil society includes a range of groups from

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voluntary groups at the village level to national and international non-governmental organizations like the UN, as well as academia and think tanks. Voluntary organizations linked to pagodas and social welfare of citizens have deep roots in Cambodia. Villages also have voluntary groups to organize funerals and other events. Citizens also form community-based organizations to focus on a specific location or issue, and committees to support community forests and fisheries. The first national formal Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) was established in 1991 and since that time the sector has grown. The Ministry of Interior of the Royal Government of Cambodia has reported that 5,386 NGOs and associations registered with the Ministry of Interior since 1993.<sup>1</sup> Most of these organizations—3,251—were NGOs. However, the Ministry said that not all these groups were active.

Those of you who are interested in additional information on the Civil Society Organization (CSO) sector may wish to consult the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC) at [ccc-cambodia.org](http://ccc-cambodia.org) or the NGO Forum on Cambodia at [ngoforum.org.kh](http://ngoforum.org.kh), both of which are membership organizations.<sup>2</sup>

Within the formal NGO sector, these organizations provide a range of services, from humanitarian and health services to support for agriculture, education and rural development. Others conduct research analytical work on development issues.

In our Cambodian Civil Society Strengthening program, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), we primarily support NGOs, as well as a few informal grassroots networks, who seek to increase civic participation in democratic processes. We have provided direct and in-kind support to a total of 24 organizations. Many of our partner NGOs work in the space provided by decentralized government services, particularly at the commune level. Our partners work to build positive and productive relationships with commune councilors, which provides a platform for concrete discussions with citizens about priorities for commune investment projects. Our NGO partners work to ensure that citizens are involved in these decisions about repairing roads and canals and providing electricity and toilets, among other services. In some cases, our partners follow up by observing the implementation of these projects as well. As they work to expand citizen participation, the NGOs may work with Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) or other community volunteers.

Our NGO partners measure success based on many factors, from the number of citizens involved to the number who request a response from government, and of course to the number and type of government responses.

For example, in the Fiscal Year 2019 alone, our project:

- Doubled the number of individuals participating in civic engagement from 11,830 in the previous year to 24,023.
- These citizens raised 305 issues with subnational authorities.

- As a result, 47 commune councils took concrete action; and
- Held 62 commune-level public forums.
- Several Indigenous groups succeeded in gaining community land titles and redress for cases involving land grabbing, illegal logging, damage caused by mining and other issues.

Notably, our partners report that the commune councilors welcome their participation.

## IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

As in other sectors, members of Cambodian civil society sought to assess the impact of COVID-19 on its activities and to address the many challenges. Our partners confirmed that despite the relatively low number of COVID-19 cases compared to those in other countries, Cambodia has suffered from significant secondary effects of the pandemic.

### **Citizen Concerns in the Wake of COVID-19**

In April 2020, EWMI beneficiaries said that they were worried about their income and livelihoods, COVID-19 itself and their inability to send their children to school, in priority order. EWMI asked 13 NGO partners to reach out to 50 beneficiaries each in their program areas to assess the concerns of their beneficiaries and the extent to which the COVID-19 situation has had an effect on their interest in program activities. Eleven of these 13 grantees reported that livelihoods and income were the top concerns, in contrast to the seven grantees who reported that fear of COVID-19 itself was a top concern.

### **Impact on Public Interest in Civic Participation**

Responses varied, but many of the respondents said that they were still interested in earlier project activities, to participate in the Commune Investment Plan (CIP) process, protect natural resources and other activities. Nonetheless, nine of the NGOs expected reduced participation in their activities.

### **Hidden Effects of COVID-19 on Marginalized People**

Although EWMI found the above data to be helpful in determining immediate priorities, it understands the limitations in the data. A broader survey of citizens and the current focus on counting COVID-19 cases misses the needs of people historically invisible to the count and among the most vulnerable—indigenous and ethnic minorities, refugees and internally displaced peoples, migrants, urban slum-dwellers, and people working in the informal sector. These groups are considered hard to reach,

and EWMF's survey methodology did not address this gap. For these groups, COVID-19 and the policy responses it has prompted may serve to magnify existing challenges. Ethnic minority peoples, reliant on subsistence livelihoods, also commonly live in geographically isolated border regions, meaning they are less able to reach or pay for healthcare services than mainstream national ethnicities. High levels of poverty in these isolated regions means that there is often insufficient infrastructure for water, sanitation and hygiene facilities.

Indigenous people also face more barriers to obtaining critical information, in this case, information about COVID-19 prevention and critically needed services. They typically live in remote areas and suffer from higher rates of illiteracy compared to the general population. Women, particularly in rural areas, have higher rates of illiteracy than men, and nearly 25 percent of women aged 25 years old and older reported in a recent survey that they have little or no education.

### **Limitations on the Number of People Who can Gather**

Very concretely, limitations on the ability to convene citizens had a significant impact on CSO activities. CSO concerns about reducing the risk of transmission, coupled with a *Prakas* in March that limited gatherings to ten people, made it difficult for CSOs to carry out their core activities, in light of their earlier reliance on organizing large gatherings. However, the situation changed as the number of cases dwindled and meeting limits were raised from 10 to 50 people.

### **Civil Society Response**

#### *Directly Combatting COVID-19*

CSOs have played an important role in providing critical health services and raising awareness about the threat of COVID-19 and ways to prevent it. International and foreign NGOs have worked actively with Cambodian health officials in delivering a proactive, multi-pronged response. When the virus emerged, CSOs joined with subnational authorities to quickly disseminate information on prevention from the government and development partners such as USAID. This served to expand the workforce for a mass awareness campaign, mobilizing Cambodian organizations that provide health services and information to vulnerable communities and even to NGOs from other sectors. One CSO also put-up posters campaigning against discrimination against Muslims when that population was being blamed for the outbreak.

#### *Promoting Civic Participation*

Our NGO partners were able to continue their existing civic participation campaigns and to expand their monitoring efforts to COVID-related areas. In the early stages of

the pandemic, they adapted their approach by having smaller meetings or meeting people virtually. Practices vary according to local interests and concerns. Some NGOs continued to patrol community forests (often in partnership with local authorities or rangers) to prevent illegal logging while others put these patrols on hold. For the most part, NGOs continued to convene citizens to identify and prioritize needs and to bring concerns to commune councils and authorities. NGOs continued to participate in a working group formed by the Ministry of Interior to discuss possible amendments to the Law on Associations and NGOs.

With regard to new efforts, NGOs who observed government implementation of infrastructure projects expanded these activities to observe distribution of benefits under the new government cash assistance program.

Our partners also continued to seek information on any gaps between citizen needs and government responses, at a time when the government faced significant challenges in creating new avenues of assistance for jobless garment workers and tourism workers and others. Our partners acknowledge the many challenges in responding to the pandemic, and they have expressed their interest in contributing to solutions in a positive manner.

### *Protecting Health and Safety of Citizens and Staff*

As our partners and other members of civil society have moved forward with their many activities, they have instituted their own health and safety protocols including requirements for masks, hand sanitizer and social distancing. Many NGOs included prevention information as a regular part of their agendas on other topics. It has become routine for participants at in-person meetings to sit far apart, as in other sectors. Although virtual meetings seem to be less popular among Cambodian NGOs than in other groups, many CSOs have increased their use of networks created on messaging apps.

## CONCLUSION AND THE WAY FORWARD

EWMI understands that policy responses to the above challenges are best developed through engagement of the widest possible array of stakeholders. Solutions to the myriad aspects of this problem and many others will require active participation by Cambodian citizens, in order to provide not only input on the scope of the problem but also to ensure buy-in and cooperation on badly needed adaptations. Our partners have demonstrated that citizens are concerned not only about the pandemic but also about the economic effects and other effects. In addition, citizens are still willing to get involved in their communities and to make positive contributions to decisions about subnational spending, etc. As the need for relief from the economic and other impacts

of COVID-19 becomes clearer, and the government responses is institutionalized, citizens may be even more motivated to get involved.

In order to better inform these processes, a deeper commitment to engaging indigenous communities is needed. Civil society and policy makers alike would benefit from a more thorough exploration of the situation facing these communities, best conducted by the communities themselves.

From a government perspective, we also see scope for citizen engagement. There is continued support for decentralization, which has enabled citizens to get involved more easily and in a more meaningful manner. The increased funding at the commune level is a promising sign. Numerous commune officials noted that they were actually seeking input on projects to include in commune investment plans.

Civic engagement will also affect Cambodia's ability to address the next major challenge facing the country: climate change. Cambodia is recognized as being highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. A 2018 report by the Ministry of Economy and Finance and National Council for Sustainable Development estimated that Cambodia's gross domestic product (GDP) may be reduced by 2.5 percent by 2030 and by nearly 10 percent by 2050, due to climate change. USAID estimated that climate change would cost Cambodia US\$16.7 billion annually by 2030, through environmental disaster, habitat change and stress on industries such as agriculture and fishing.

At a time when resources are stretched thin to address urgent priorities, civil society is able to convene citizens and facilitate productive discussions to inform important decisions by government actors. Civil society can also provide timely feedback from citizens on the ground, to contribute to sustainable solutions that protect Cambodia's resources while promoting social and economic development.

## NOTES

1. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/ministry-carry-out-ngo-census>
2. CCC has around 170 members and NGO Forum has around 96 members, according to their websites.