



Data and Dialogue for Development in Cambodia

**An Analysis of the Knowledge Sector in Cambodia:
Summary of Main Findings
2019**

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Summary of main findings

1. Introduction, objectives, and study methodology

In May 2019, The Asia Foundation and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Cambodia commissioned a team of three experts to conduct a study of the knowledge to policy sector in Cambodia to inform the programming of the Ponlok Chomnes: Data and Dialogue for Development program.

This summary report presents the findings from the study conducted between July and August 2019 which had three main aims:

- Review emerging national development issues and identify priority sectors that also aligned with gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) principles;
- Define the knowledge sector and take stock of the organisations that generate knowledge and evidence to directly or indirectly influence policy-making processes in the three priority sectors.
- Review gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) within the broader national development agenda and in the knowledge sector.

In this study we draw from the definition of the knowledge system developed by the Knowledge Sector Initiative in Indonesia (AusAID 2012) ¹ ‘the institutional landscape of government, private sector, and civil society organizations that provide research and analysis to support the development of public policy’. As a system, it is part of every policy sector at national and sub-national levels. The key elements of the systems are:

- **Knowledge producing** organisations (the focus of this study);
- Policy makers and civil servants who **demand and use** different types of evidence to inform policy debate and decisions;
- Organisations and individuals who communicate and synthesise knowledge which can be referred to as **intermediaries**; and
- The regulations, procedures, and norms that determine how the elements of the system interact formally and informally which can be referred to as **enabling environment**.

The data collection has involved:

- A **review** of policy documents, strategic plans, evaluations and other reports on economic strategy and direction and research sector in Cambodia,
- **Interviews with key informants** representing policy makers/civil servants (6), development partners (5), research institutes and think-tanks (13), NGOs (2), and independent researchers (3),
- **Validation** of findings with selected experts and stakeholders.

2. Development challenges and policy priorities of the Cambodian Government

The main policy documents that define the national development strategy of the Government of Cambodia are the Rectangular Strategy Phase 4 (RS4),² the recently adopted National Strategic

¹ AusAID (2012). Knowledge Sector Initiative Design Document, Jakarta

² RGC (2018) Rectangular Strategy Phase 4

Development Plan (NSDP)³, the National Social Protection Policy Framework (NSPPF) (2016-2025)⁴. In one way or another all the research and analysis produced by development partners, researchers and other non-state actors refer to these documents and the priorities they describe.

Our literature review suggests a set of priority areas (see the table below). Some of those priority areas, including those related to gender and inclusiveness, are well aligned with the Cambodia Sustainable Development Goals (CSDGs). As for gender and inclusiveness, there is optimism about the mechanisms through which ASEAN economic integration may create opportunities for accelerating gender equality and women's economic empowerment in the region and in Cambodia⁵.

The common denominator of policy documents reviewed for this study by the government and research outputs by various knowledge producers is that they recognize the progress made in terms of social economic development in Cambodia, that challenges remain, and that the extent of the transformation that the country will go through in the next five to ten years depends on both key domestic and external factors such as economic integration, the role of China, skills and jobs, governance, and social protection services.

The RS4 and NSDP sets out four strategic goals for the country by 2023, economic growth and stability, jobs and skills, poverty and vulnerability reduction, and better governance. Four strategic areas will help to contribute to these goals: human resource development, economic diversification, private sector development and employment, and sustainable development. Crosscutting areas such as gender, inclusiveness, and vulnerability are included in the key national policies such as; NSPPF, Ministry of Education Youth and Sports (MoEYS) Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Plan (GMAP) 2016-2020⁶ which is aligned with the Education Sector Plan (ESP), *DGTVET Gender Policy 2016*⁷ aiming to ensure that Cambodian women, persons with disability and other vulnerable groups, and MoWA Neary Rattanak IV. Driven partly by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda, these issues are aligned with the priorities of key development partners and non-state actors.

Governance and institutional reforms are central to the goals and strategic areas mentioned above. Three specific governance reforms are particularly important: Public Financial Management (PFM), decentralization (D&D), and public administrative reform (PAR). These have been complemented recently by a fourth: monitoring and evaluation (M&E). This refers not only to sector programmes or projects, but at the macro-policy level, and shows the government intent to strengthen its capability to generate data, research, and analysis about the country's social and economic development. The Government, led by the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF), is finalizing a new M&E framework to measure the progress of the RS4 and to complement the ongoing M&E of the NSDP. UN and other development partners are the key investors in data generation, use and M&E for gender and social protection related issues and policies.

Based on our policy documents' review, we suggest two categories of policy issues / policy areas in terms of the opportunities that exist to test ways to strengthen the knowledge sector, and in particular the knowledge production to inform policy. The policy areas #1 may have a greater need to strengthen the capability for generating data, analysis and research. That said, the grouping is

³ RGC (2019) National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) for 2019-23.

⁴ RGC (2017) National Social Protection Policy Framework (NSPPF) (2016-2025)

⁵ Projected Gender Impact of the ASEAN Economic Community Jakarta, ASEAN Secretariat, June 2016

⁶ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (2015): *Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Plan in Education 2016-2020*, Unofficial Translation, Phnom Penh.

⁷ Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training, DGTVET (2016): *Gender Policy and Action Plan*, Phnom Penh.; Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (2017): *Technical and Vocational Education and Training Statistics 2015-16*, TVETMIS Office, Department of Labour Market Information, Phnom Penh.

indicative at best and intends only to serve as a context for the following discussion on the landscape and development of knowledge sector in Cambodia.

Priority areas #1	Priority areas #2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jobs, skills and migration • Foreign policy, FDI and Changing Regional dynamics • Social protection • Urban vulnerability • Public service delivery and innovation • Agriculture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education • Health • Financial sector and household debts • Service sector • Digital economy • SME promotion • Judicial sector

3. Knowledge sector in Cambodia

The findings presented in this section reflect the thematic and sectoral perspective of the knowledge sector of our key informants: economic development, foreign policy, governance, decentralization, jobs and skills, gender, social protection, and rural livelihood.

There are three groups of actors in the knowledge system: knowledge users, intermediaries, and producers. Policy makers (and civil servants) are the main group of knowledge users. Their need for evidence can be divided into (i) need for expert knowledge for policy formulation and/or specific technical issues (e.g. public financial management, violence against women), (ii) survey data for specific policy formulation (e.g. agricultural modernization, social protection), (iii) citizen perception on specific issues (e.g. minimum wages), and (iv) data from impact evaluation (e.g. outcomes of budget uses in specific sectors).

In our interviews, three other groups of knowledge users have emerged: development partners/NGOs, the public, and universities.

In addition to being the main funders of knowledge production (more on this point later), development partners and International Non-governmental organizations (INGOs) need and use expert knowledge and survey data to inform the design, implementation, and M&E of programs and projects. The knowledge production to respond to these needs of development partners and NGOs over the last 30 years has been huge and it may have had a limited influence on policy since its content was mainly directed to programs and projects. University professors, researchers, lecturers and students need data, analysis, and research for teaching and research projects. However, as various research has shown, such need is still very limited. The general public has become important in terms of knowledge demand and use, thanks to the rapid expansion of social media in Cambodia (esp. Facebook) and use of these platforms also (but not only) to inform opinion on key political events.

For policymakers, development partners and NGOs, their needs for data, analysis, and research are largely driven by their mandate, programming-needs, and external policy and development agendas such as the SDGs. Obtaining sectoral segregated data on GESI issues is particularly challenging (for example there is a big difference between the quality and availability of sectoral segregated data in education or health sector, compared to agriculture and justice sector. Increasingly, these needs are being influenced also by new forms of evidence such as the analysis of citizen perceptions and sentiments from social media. In this way, social media (and data analytics from social media)

can play an important role in suggesting new questions that policy-makers should pay attention to or explore further.⁸

While much the existing funding for research in Cambodia comes from development partners, there are a growing number of government-led initiatives that are funded through the national budget. For example, the MEF has procured surveys and studies on labour and employment, basic education, and the use of national budget for public services. These are positive signs although it may take time before a more institutionalised process to identify and procure different type of evidence is in part of the way of working of the public administration. This is partly due to an uneven recognition of the potential and value of evidence-informed policy making in the Government at large, and the time-consuming and bureaucratic procurement process for public service programmes (as opposed to infrastructure ones).

There is a gap between knowledge users and producers, in particular between policy makers and civil servants and knowledge producers who are considered not be ‘not in the [policy] loop’. Three interrelated factors might explain the persistence of this gap: (1) lack of trust, limited communication which can lead also to miscommunication, and a very weak or absent set of norms and protocols on how the two sides can work and collaborate with one another. These gaps exist right from (and especially at) the inception phase of research and can affect the relevance, quality, and uptake of research findings and recommendations.

4. Knowledge producers

Besides the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), statistics departments and offices in line ministries, we have identified six other groups of knowledge producers across policy issues: (i) Government’s research groups/organisations/units,⁹ (ii) technical experts from development partners, (iii) research institutes and think-tanks, (iv) university research centres, (v) UN agencies and NGOs, and (vi) consultancy firms and individual consultants.

Before discussing specific findings, three cross-cutting characteristics of the knowledge production in Cambodia are worth mentioning here.

1. Over the last 20 years or so, there has been a very high number of often uncoordinated research projects which have been implemented in and on Cambodia key policy areas. The number of data, analysis, and research projects conducted with the support from development partners.¹⁰ The number of these projects is however not known.¹¹ This is particularly true for GESI issues and topics.
2. Many young Cambodian students have received scholarships to study overseas and have returned back with new knowledge and skills such as in ICT which can support research implementation and dissemination. However, it is not known to what extent the potential of these resources and medium has been harnessed.
3. There has been an emerging and growing pool of professionals, practitioners and entrepreneurs (including private universities) who value research, wish to make uses of its findings, and convert them into practical and actionable ideas.

Our study focused on research institutes and think-tanks. In addition to the few well established ones, a number of new ones have been established during the last five years, mostly by researchers

⁸ Social media platforms can also be the space where fake news can create misinformation and a negative attitude against different forms of evidence

⁹ A few key ministries, especially the MEF, have formed their own research groups to meet specific policy formulation and M&E needs. Yet, the roles and functions of these groups are still informal and ad-hoc.

¹⁰ A few key large datasets are expected in the next few years, including: The National Population Census, Agriculture Census, Cambodian Demography and Household Survey (CDHS), and possibly, labour survey.

¹¹ There is however no concrete data on the exact number of those projects.

who have established their names and have good links and networks within the Government organisations. A few of these new research organisations are associated to public or private universities. Some of these organisations cover a wide range of policy areas with their research (e.g. governance, economics, education), some are more focused on specific policy issues such as foreign policy or even as small as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Their missions and goals (whether in writing or not) mention contributing to evidence-informed policy making, building research capacity, and/or raising public awareness on key policy issues. How they actually operate and manage their work, however, varies considerably. The following are some of our key observations:

- Few research institutes/think tanks have close links to policy-making circles (they are *'outside the [policy] loop'*). Where such links exist, it is mainly because of two factors: (i) personal relationships and trust that the directors/board of directors and/or senior researchers have with relevant Government counterparts. and (ii) receive the support from development partners in establishing such connections. In other words, the links between research organisations and policy-makers is mainly ad-hoc and depends very much on the personal relationships of key individuals mentioned above.
- Most of the research projects follow a standard research process which begins with an inception and goes through to dissemination and publication. Some of the challenges through this process are the need to design at the inception research questions that matter to policy-makers. During implementation, the access to data and data sets which, as mentioned earlier, are still fragmented. During dissemination the challenge is about reaching the right audience. At publication, the challenge is a lack of a reliable quality assurance processes, especially in a form of peer-review. On the last point, it is observed that a research project is likely to have rigorous peer review process only when it is a part of a regional project and/or connected to a university overseas. Another important challenge relates to recruiting, training and retaining qualified researchers within the organisations. Good researchers, once they have gained sufficient experience, tend to choose to work as freelance consultants because of the higher remuneration.
- Research outputs include opinion pieces, research papers, journal articles, and policy documents. The most common dissemination practice are workshops which sometimes are accompanied by policy briefs or multi-media and social media communication of the findings. One critical but often neglected problem is the accessibility and quality of Khmer language research products, which are often treated as an after-thought requirement once the English ones are already produced.
- The systems to assess the uptake and impacts of research products is very weak within organisations which often rely mainly on anecdotal and self-claimed observations. That said, one hypothesis to put forward is that more uptakes and impacts can be expected if the products are produced by those considered as *'inside the loop,'* namely, the Government's own research groups, technical experts (including those from donor agencies and individual consultants) whose expertise is requested directly by the Government. While reliance on external experts is still heavy, one positive trend is that, in producing expected outputs, the experts are usually required to work closely with (and, hopefully, build capacity of) the internal research groups.
- One opinion on this question of uptake and impact is that for a research project to be policy-relevant, it does not need to focus only on the uptake (i.e. targeting policy-maker level), but should also consider the side-take (i.e. other similar institutions and NGOs) and the public. The complementarity among these up-, side- and down-takes deserves more

attention, especially given the observed increased attention by the Government about public opinion (mostly expressed through social media) to shape its research needs and policy making priorities.

5. Programming suggestions

Based on our findings, we have the following suggestions:

- At a more **strategic level**, two points are worth considering. First, the program should be clear on its objectives to support knowledge sector for (i) policy-making influence purposes, (ii) building capacity among specific groups of knowledge producers, and (iii) informing the broader public on specific issues. These objectives are complementary but an emphasis on one or more of these has implications on the program design. Second, the issues of sustainability should be given attention right from the formulation phase as this too will shape the design of the program. One concrete suggestion we have is to ensure sustainability by investing during the three years of the program (and not just at the end) in research as a 'positive demonstration effect' and 'learning by doing spirit' on how the capability of knowledge producers in the knowledge system can be developed so it can generate ideas and suggestions for other initiatives.
- At a more **management and operational level**, the program should focus on 'connecting the dots' rather than investing on creating new dots, unless they are of high strategic values. This implies the need to emphasize the roles of the program as a 'convener' and 'facilitator' rather than implementer. On the design question, its content aside, it is recommended that it be kept simple yet clear in terms of what objectives to achieve, outputs to produce and who is doing what. Simplicity can ensure, among other things, shared sense of mission and trust building among key stakeholders.
- On **promoting policy impact and partnership building**, the strategy of connecting the dots can take the form of: (i) forming and assisting a joint Government-CSO committee (such as the Technical Advisory Committee), (ii) engaging emerging key interested stakeholders from different backgrounds to help inform a research agenda, implement, and provide feedback on research findings, (iii) promoting collaboration among research institutions in the country, and (iv) connecting research institutions with regional research networks and universities.
- On **capacity building**, connecting the dots can take the forms of: (i) facilitating access and effective use of existing data for research purposes, (ii) technical support/ joint training on how to develop research products for dissemination on social media, (iii) technical support on how to develop and improve a quality assurance and peer review process (in collaboration with regional research networks, think tanks, and universities abroad), (iv) build capacity of national institutions to understand the importance and use of disaggregated data to better address GESI considerations in policy making, (v) connecting research institutes and think-tanks with universities and alumni associations to share information on research employment and capacity building opportunities, and (vi) urging more attention on the need for better Khmer research products.

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Disclaimer:

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