

A DIAGNOSTIC STUDY ON THE POLICY PROCESS AND USE OF DATA

"The Case of Cambodia and
Insights from ASEAN"





A Diagnostic Study on the Policy Process and Use of Data

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Insights from ASEAN"

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Disclaimer

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List of Abbreviations

ACRF	ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework
ACSS	ASEAN Community Statistical System
ACSS-SCPC	ASEAN Community Statistical System-Sub-Committee on Planning and Coordination
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADGSOM	Asian Digital Senior Officials' Meeting
AFCS	ASEAN Framework of Cooperation in Statistics
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AIMD	ASEAN Integration Monitoring Directorate
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEANStats	ASEAN Statistics Division
AVI	Asian Vision Institute
AWPB	Annual Work Plan and Budget
BSP	Budget Strategic Plan
BSRS	Budget System Reform Strategy
CamDX	Cambodia Data Exchange
CDB	Commune Database
CDC	Council for Development of Cambodia
CDHS	Cambodia Demographic and Health survey
CDRI	Cambodia Development Resource Institute
CICP	Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace
CKS	Centre for Khmer Studies
CMDGs	Cambodia Millennium Development Goals
CoM	Council of Minister
CPP	Cambodian People Party
CPS	Centre for Policy Studies
CRDB	Cambodian Rehabilitation and Development Board
CSDGs	Cambodian Sustainable Development Goals
CSES	Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey
CSF	Commune/Sangkat Fund
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
D&D	Deconcentration and Decentralization
DBMIS	Database Management Information System
DBMS	Database Management Systems
DCPS	Development Cooperation and Partnership Strategy
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DMF	Data Management Framework
DMK	District, Municipality, and Khan
DP	Development Partners
DSBB	Dissemination Standards Bulletin Board
EMIS	Education Management Information System
FF	Future Forum
FMIS	Financial Management Information System
GDP	General Department of Policy

GDSNAF	General Department of Sub-National Administration Finance
GI	Geographical Indications
GS-NSPC	General Secretariat of National Social Protection Council
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ICT	Information and Communications Technology

Executive Summary

THE STUDY

Due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic, Cambodia is about to enter a new development phase. After economic slow-down in 2020 and 2021, but with more stability in cases, priorities have shifted to economic recovery. This requires more rigorous domestic reforms and more effective regional cooperation, especially at the Association of South-East Asia Nations (ASEAN) level. In addition, the complexity of the emerging development trends, both domestically and regionally, calls for a more effective public policy process and demands better data and evidence.

Despite the abundance of research and reports, insight into how public policy in Cambodia works is still limited. Even less documented is how the Government of Cambodia produces and uses data to shape the policy process. This research seeks to help close this gap by providing an up-to-date and comprehensive understanding of the public policy process, data use, and data governance in Cambodia and ASEAN in the context of the post-COVID-19 recovery. The findings are primarily intended for the current and potential partners of the Ponlok Chomnes Program and a wider audience, including researchers in public policy, students, and other interested stakeholders. The research, however, is not a systematic assessment of the current policy process and data governance nor an evaluation of the Ponlok Chomnes Program. There are already other research works that focus on what the Government needs to do to further reform the current national statistical system.

THE FINDINGS

Post-COVID-19 development trends and priorities: The research starts by discussing key post-COVID-19 megatrends, as well as the Cambodian government's recovery plan for the post-COVID-19 period. Megatrends are defined as the great forces in societal development that will very likely affect the future in all areas over the next 10-15 years. For Cambodia, the economic megatrends to look out for are trends in foreign investment, digital economy, data governance, social protection and labor, and climate change. The Cambodian Government has reflected these trends in its post-COVID-19 recovery plan, focusing on promoting key sectors (e.g., agriculture, tourism), economic diversification, regional cooperation, and improving resilience (e.g., Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) development, digitalization, social protection). Social inclusion and support to vulnerable groups are also given special attention in the policy. These priorities are well in line with those set at the ASEAN level, which is beneficial as Cambodia is poised to become the Chairman at the ASEAN 2022 Summit.

The public policy process in Cambodia: The complexity of the emerging development trends calls for a more effective public policy process, demanding better data and evidence. There are long-term (3 to 5 years) and medium-term (3 years) policies in Cambodia, each consisting of three stages: policy formulation,

implementation, and monitoring and evaluation (M&E). The study found that, in the last five years, standard policy processes have been established and continuously improved. An increasing amount of data has been used. However, it is still limited in terms of policy-budget linkages and M&E (especially at the impact level). Other de facto factors shaping the policy process include political interest, cross-ministerial coordination, and human factors (e.g., leadership, young technocrats, trust).

While sharing specific general processes and features, Cambodia's policy process and data use vary by sector and issue. Using four different cases (i.e., social protection during and after COVID-19 responses, decentralization reform, support to SMEs in the tourism sector, and youth development and engagement), the study illustrates that the variation can be explained by several key factors, including the level of political interest, required inter-ministerial coordination, quality of management and technocrats in the leading agencies, and quality of M&E framework of the sector/issue. However, despite the variation, one common pattern is that there has been a moderate amount of data produced, but the challenges are data sharing and data use.

Data governance and data use: Effective data governance is critical to inform the policy process. As in other countries, the Government of Cambodia and development partners are the biggest data producers and users. In the last decade, key stakeholders have produced large amounts of data in the national statistical system, namely, the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), line ministries, and other relevant agencies both at the national and sub-national levels. The Government has also encouraged better use of data through various reform strategies, including the National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) (2019-2023), the Cambodia Digital Economy and Society Policy Framework (2021-2035), the Public Financial Management Reform Program (PFMRP), and through the decentralization reform. There has also been partnership at the ASEAN level to further improve the national statistical system and regional collaboration on data, including big data.

Despite progress, key areas for improvement remain. These include the need to improve data quality necessary for the estimation of key macro-economic indicators (such as the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)) and data on gender and specific vulnerable groups, especially concerning the impact of COVID-19 on these groups. In the context of digitalization, improving data production and use requires both attention to strengthening the essential functions of the national statistical system and catching up with new digital technology such as big data.

The challenges of data sharing: Data sharing is a challenge even within the Government. Despite the clear national statistical system (NSS) institutional framework, in practice, there is limited awareness about the roles of the National Institute of Statistics (NIS) and statistical units in line ministries and agencies. The Government has tried to address these challenges by using digital technology and

implementing the data user engagement strategy. In some countries, the challenge of data sharing has been addressed by using data intermediaries. Cambodia can learn from the experiences of these countries. The Government also has plans to better engage the private sector and link the national statistical system to big data.

Engagement of non-state actors: There has been only limited engagement from non-state actors due mainly to the persistent challenges of trust. Personal connection, friendship, and perceived political tendency are still critical for trust-building between government and civil society organizations (CSOs). However, it is observed that it seems easier to build trust and connection among the younger generation of bureaucrats and young professionals in CSOs, partly because many of them tend to share educational and professional backgrounds (e.g., same schools, same scholarship, and training programs, etc). The study also identified a few other positive trends. First, in the last five years, Cambodian researchers have played more prominent roles in research institutions and think tanks. Second, there have been more young researcher groups formed and supported by various CSOs. The positive trends imply strong potential for building the knowledge sector in Cambodia.

There has been more systematic sharing of data and research findings on websites and social media, especially since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, accessing and using quantitative data with large samples is still a constraint to many Cambodian researchers. With this shortcoming, many Cambodian researchers have had a hard time getting the attention of policymakers, who tend to downplay qualitative research and any quantitative research with a small sample size. In some cases, however, findings from qualitative research are also welcomed by policymakers if they bring more insights and solutions based on international and regional experiences.

Emerging opportunities on data access: Better access to data is key to improving research works in Cambodia for policy purposes. It is expected that researchers outside the Government will have better access to Government data as the Data User Engagement Strategy led by the NIS is implemented. However, in addition to data access, the use of already available data is also critical. As of now, a lot of data has already been made available online, but some local researchers and CSOs might not have used it to its full potential. Another area to explore is collecting and accessing data using digital platforms, including an open-source app (e.g., Kobo Toolbox, Google forms, chatbot), open-data sources (e.g., those offered by the World Bank, IMF, and others), and citizen-generated data. Cambodian researchers can also access many development datasets on ASEAN via its official websites.

Partnership at the regional level: Partnership at the ASEAN level can bring about new opportunities on data governance for Cambodia. Currently, the Government has regularly provided various data to the ASEAN Statistics Division (ASEANstats),

including international trade and balance of payment. ASEANstats aims to become an authoritative source of relevant, comparable, and timely ASEAN statistics to facilitate knowledge building in a strong, confident and respected ASEAN Community. Big data and private sector engagement are key components of the agenda at the 2022 ASEAN summit.

Engagement with the private sector: Partnership with the private sector is critical in promoting the use of private-intent data for public policy purposes. In Cambodia, however, the idea is still very new, despite the rapid increase of internet use, e-commerce, e-payment, and platform business in the last five years. The readiness of the national statistical system is key to harnessing private intent data. That readiness, in turn, depends on the quality of infrastructure (both hardware and software) for storing, examining, and visualizing the data and the capacity of the official statisticians and data scientists. To move in that direction, one suggestion is for Cambodia to draw on experiences from other ASEAN countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, and to conduct specific experiments with big data to provide frequent statistics at a disaggregate level.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAMMATIC CONSIDERATIONS

The recommendations are for the Ponlok Chomnes program and other similar programs seeking to provide support to policy research capacity and data use in Cambodia. The Ponlok Chomnes program seeks to support and strengthen the knowledge sector's capacity and to inform public policy analysis in Cambodia. To further improve its effectiveness and impacts at the strategic level, the Program should consider positioning itself more explicitly as a 'data intermediary' between the Government and non-state actors; among non-state actors; and between Cambodian researchers and those at the regional levels, including ASEAN and Australian academic institutions. The objectives should be to promote: 1) trust and collaboration in research formulation, implementation, data sharing, data use, and research dissemination among these actors, and 2) regional perspectives in data analysis and adoption of new data-initiation such as big data and the use of private-intent data for development.

In line with the proposed strategic direction, the Program can consider specific operational ideas as listed below:

- Focusing on key development issues and public policy gaps:
The Program should encourage research on topics focusing on post-COVID-19 recovery, with extra attention on the questions of vulnerability and the impacts of the various policy measures implemented by the Government and how they can be improved. Where applicable, insights from ASEAN countries should be considered. Megatrends, including regional economic integration, foreign investment, digital economy, data governance, SME development, social protection, cross-border migration, and youth development, should be given more attention.
- Building trust and partnerships among key stakeholders:
The existing partnerships that the program has with Government institu-

tions should be further deepened. This can be done by working more closely with specific general departments and supporting joint research projects involving state and non-state actors.

- Facilitating data collection, sharing, and use:

The Program should play a role as a hub collecting, storing, and updating data from various government agencies and sources, both in Cambodia and in the region. The collected data should be made available to its research partners and the public while following any due rules and procedures. Where applicable, the Program should also offer training on understanding and making use of the data.

- Advocating for more data sharing:

In line with the Government's policies (e.g., the Data User Engagement Strategy, PFMRP and the NP-SNDD), the Program should play an active role in advocating for more data sharing from the Government to outside researchers. This advocacy can target specific datasets such as the labor survey, CSES, agriculture survey, the upcoming enterprise surveys, budget data allocation, Commune database, and data relating to social protection.

- Promoting young researchers:

The Program should encourage its partners to engage young researchers and interns in supported research projects and design research training programs tailored for young researchers, especially female researchers and those from the provinces. In addition, the Program should also consider providing mentoring support to emerging youth initiatives and programs, such as the Volunteer for My Community (VMC) program.

- Initiating new and forward-looking research topics:

Examples of such topics include big data and the engagement of the private sector in critical sectors such as tourism, agriculture, and SMEs. In initiating the new issues, the Program should also bring more perspectives from the regional level, especially ASEAN.

- Establishing partnerships with regional research institutions:

TAF and DFAT, with their rich network at the ASEAN level and beyond, should act as a bridge to link local research institutions to the regional level and initiate regional research projects, especially on new research topics mentioned earlier. Such partnerships are essential for technical capacity building and motivation, credibility enhancing, and trust-building, especially between local institutions and government agencies.



1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Rationale


Cambodia is about to enter a new development phase, due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic. For the decade before the pandemic, Cambodia had achieved an average annual growth of about 7 percent. In 2020, however, like many other countries in the world, the growth rate was reduced to -3.1%, with key sectors and industries such as tourism severely affected. As the pandemic has become more under control, priorities have shifted to economic recovery, which requires more rigorous domestic reforms as well as more effective regional cooperation, especially at the Association of South-East Asia Nations (ASEAN). ASEAN is even more relevant to Cambodia as Cambodia assumed the chairmanship at the 2022 ASEAN summit.

The complexity of the emerging development trends, both domestically and regionally, calls for a more effective public policy process, which demands better data and evidence. As in other countries, the public policy process in Cambodia includes policy formulation, policy implementation, and policy monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Throughout these phases, data and evidence are crucial components to help ensure an effective public policy process. However, harnessing the utility of data and evidence for such purposes requires a good understanding of the public policy process itself and, within that, how data or evidence is produced, shared, used, and reused. In the context of digitalization, improving data production and use also means paying more attention to strengthening the basic functions of the national statistical system while seeking to harness the potential of digital technology such as big data.

Despite an abundance of research and reports, insight into how public policy in Cambodia works is still limited. A lot of research has been done and published on Cambodia's contemporary politics and state.^[1] There are also a few comprehensive studies on Cambodia's economic systems.^[2] However, as far as its public policy process is concerned, the literature is still limited. This limitation is partly due to the lack of official guidelines on the public policy process and lack of access by independent researchers to those that already exist. This situation has changed for the better, especially in the last few years. More guidelines on policy formulation, implementation, and M&E have been adopted. Many of them have been made available online, thanks largely to the rapid use of the internet both inside and outside of the Government.

¹ For some of those articles please see for instance, Luo, Jing Jing, and Kheang Un. "China's Role in the Cambodian People's Party's Quest for Legitimacy." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 43, no. 2 (2021): 395-419; Un, Kheang. *Cambodia: Return to Authoritarianism*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.

² One recent example is the Hang, C. (2015) Cambodia's economy: Toward a brighter future – Progress, challenges, and future prospects.




The role of data for development has gained increasing attention in the past decade, both at the international level and in Cambodia. At the international level, the role of data has become so crucial for development that it became the topic of the 2021 World Development Report (WDR), titled ‘Data for Better Lives.’ In Cambodia, due to fast-paced economic growth and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, the demand for high-quality, timely, and easily accessible data by government agencies has become unprecedented to inform the policy-making process and monitoring performance. However, acquiring such data is not an automatic process and requires not just the effort of the state but also non-state actors. Even more relevant is the need for the Government to explore and harness new data technologies and innovations to build a national data system that is more integrated and adaptable to recent development trends.

Because of the global and interconnected nature of the modern world, comparative perspectives have become even more critical for policy-making purposes. It is important that policymakers and researchers on public policy have good data not just on Cambodia but also to examine other countries, especially those of comparable development status and context. In more operational terms, this suggests a need to have better comparative perspectives at the regional level, especially within Asia and ASEAN in particular.

How data or evidence is used in the public policy process in Cambodia is a relatively new topic. One can find key information on how the NSS is set up, how the national development policies, such as the National Strategic Development Policy (NSDP), are formulated and monitored, and how the budgeting process is supposedly done by reading various policy, legal, and administrative documents. However, the insights from those resources tend to be fragmented and primarily technical. What is missing is a more synthesized analysis of how public policy and the use of data/evidence is performed in practice, key factors affecting it, and how it varies across sectors or situations. Such insight, it is here argued, is critical when seeking to promote more use of data or evidence in the policy process.

In this report, the term data refers to ‘evidence,’ ‘information,’ ‘statistics’ or ‘research findings’ both qualitative and quantitative in nature. The definition is proposed for the following reasons. Firstly, the term ‘data’ is similar and straightforward enough to the definition of ‘evidence’ in the literature on public policy. According to an International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) report (2016), evidence refers to ‘any information that helps policy-makers make decisions and get results that are concrete, manageable, and achievable.’^[3] In the 2021 WDR, data is defined simply as ‘information about people, things, and systems.’ It also specifies that data can be quantitative or qualitative and can be public intent or private intent.

³ INASP (2016) Evidence-informed policy making toolkit,



[4] Secondly, when translated into Khmer (tinn-ney), the term data is more understandable and relatable in the Government policy process. Thirdly, by using the term ‘data,’ this research intends to be more relevant to the ongoing international debate about data use in development and the effort to modernize the national statistical system in Cambodia. [5]

1.2. The Research Objectives and Research Questions

The research was conducted in the context of the Ponlok Chomnes: Data and Dialogue for Development in Cambodia Program. The program has been implemented by The Asia Foundation (the Foundation) and funded by the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The Ponlok Chomnes Program seeks to strengthen the capacity of Cambodian knowledge sector institutions to undertake quality research to inform policy analysis and dialogue in Cambodia.

The research aims to provide the latest and most comprehensive understanding of the public policy process, data use, and data governance in Cambodia and ASEAN in the context of the post-COVID-19 recovery. The findings are primarily intended for the current and potential partners of the Ponlok Chomnes Program and a wider audience, including researchers in public policy, students, and other interested stakeholders. As far as the Ponlok Chomnes Program is concerned, this research is not an evaluation of its performance but an evidence-generating exercise to inform future programming strategies and approaches.

To achieve its objective, the research seeks to answer the following specific questions:

- **What are the key development trends and priorities for the post-COVID-19 period in Cambodia?**

What is the relevance at the ASEAN level, including Cambodia's chairmanship in 2022? These two questions are answered in Section 2, which provides context for the subsequent sections.

- **What are the process and key features of the policy process and data use in Cambodia?**

This question will be addressed in Section 3.

- **How is data governance for policy purposes in Cambodia?**


Section 4 answers this question in detail, covering state and non-state actors, and links the discussion to digitalization and ongoing initiatives at the ASEAN level.

- **How do the policy process and data use differ by specific cases of sector and sub-sectors?**

Section 5 will present four case studies to illustrate the variations, including social protection, decentralization, support to SMEs in the tourism sector,

⁴ World Bank (2021) WDR on Data for Better Lives (p. 24)

⁵ NIS (2018) National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (2019-2023)



and youth development. In each, where relevance, insights from the ASEAN level are presented.

- Based on the findings, what are the key conclusions and recommendations for the Ponlok Chomnes program or other similar programs seeking to promote the knowledge sector in Cambodia? These are discussed in the last chapter of the report.

To provide more technical information to the audience, various boxes, tables, and annexes are included. These pieces of additional information, backed up mostly by online references, are for those who want to learn more about specific topics such as the roles of the finance ministry in the policy process, data governance and digitalization policy, Cambodia's current national statistical system, and relevant policies and initiatives at the ASEAN level.


It is important to note early on that this research is not a systematic assessment of the current public policy process and data use. It is not an attempt to provide policy recommendations for the Government on how to improve the national statistical system. There are already other research works that focus on these, and this study refers to these where applicable.^[6] Instead, as just mentioned, this research is a diagnostic study, and an attempt to collect, synthesize, and analyze the latest available information and data on the topic to provide a better picture of how the public policy process in Cambodia works, how it has managed to make use of data, the challenges it faces, and how it plans to address those challenges. The research also refers to international literature and insights from the ASEAN region so that readers can establish a comparative understanding of where Cambodia is and where it should be going.

1.3. Methodology

To answer the above questions, the research uses the following methodology.

- In its early phase, the researcher sought to understand, verify, and synthesize the expectations of both the Ponlok Chomnes team and its partners about the focus and expected value addition of the research. This step was critical for shaping the overall outline and analytical framework of the study.
- The researcher employed a more iterative approach between literature review, key informant interviews, and verification meetings. The literature reviewed in this research was extensive. It included international literature (such as data governance, policy process, public financial management, post-COVID-19 economic recovery), policy documents and technical guidelines in Cambodia, policies and initiatives at the ASEAN level, and existing databases. The literature review provides preliminary insights and hypotheses, which the research then uses to further explore and/or verify with key informants.
- The researcher also benefited from the insights shared and debated at the

⁶ See for instance, RGC (2021) Report on the assessment of the Implementation of National Strategy for the Development of Statistics 2019-2023 and Statistics 2030: Towards Reform Agenda. Phnom Penh.



Ponlok Chomnes National Policy Forum on Cambodia's COVID-19 Recovery Pathways in November 2021. Insights shared by the speakers from the Government and non-Government sectors have been compiled into a booklet ^[7] and are cited in this report.

- The researcher also relied on the personal knowledge gained and observations from working as a researcher for the last 18 years, mainly on the policy process and data use in Cambodia. While this pool of knowledge is helpful, its limitation and a potential source of bias are recognized and noted.

Referencing policy and legal documents is given special attention in this study.

The policy process in Cambodia (as in other countries), in some respects, follows official rules and regulations. As such, this report gives extra attention to ensure a concise referencing to relevant laws, sub-decrees, Prakas, circulars, and guidelines. That said, it is also common knowledge that there are both the de jure and de facto aspects in the implementation of a policy. This research discusses both.

Case studies are used to provide a more nuanced picture of the policy process and data use in Cambodia. While the policy process follows a generic set of rules and norms, it is important that the research presents how it varies across cases and the factors that can help explain such variation. This is the main methodological reason why Section 5 (case studies) is included.

1.4. Structure of the Report

This report is structured as follow:

- Section 2 starts by discussing key post-COVID-19 megatrends, both at the global and regional level. It then focuses on the case of Cambodia, especially its post-COVID-19 recovery plan, followed by a discussion on what has been planned and implemented at the ASEAN level, including Cambodia's chairmanship of the 2022 ASEAN Summit;
- Building on the macro-picture presented in Section 2, Section 3 focuses on the core topics of Cambodia's public policy process, key stakeholders, mechanisms, and data use in each phase of the policy process;
- Section 4 zooms in on the more specific question concerning data governance for public purposes in Cambodia. In there, it discusses key conceptual framework (based mainly on the 2021 WDR), legal and policy frameworks, data production and sharing by the Government, and engagement of non-state actors, including research institutions, non-government organizations (NGOs), and the private sector. It also discusses data governance in the context of digitalization and partnership at the ASEAN level;

⁷ The Asia Foundation (2022) Ponlok Chomnes National Policy Forum Booklet, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

- Section 5 complements the previous sections by presenting four specific cases to show how the public policy process and data use in Cambodia vary, despite their shared process and certain generic features. Those four cases include 1) social protection during COVID-19 responses, 2) decentralization reform, 3) support for tourism sector SME during COVID-19 pandemic, and 4) youth engagement in community development. In each case, relevant insights from the ASEAN level are also offered; and
- Section 6 offers concluding remarks and recommendations for the Ponlok Chomnes program in its future design and implementation.

2. Post-Covid-19 Megatrends, Cambodia's Priorities, and ASEAN

2.1. Post-COVID-19 Megatrends

Megatrends are defined as the great forces in societal development that will very likely affect the future in all areas over the next 10-15 years. Megatrends can be social, economic, political, environmental, or technological. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, many top think-tanks and multi-lateral development agencies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, UN agencies, the World Economic Forum (WEF), and the Economist have put out a series of publications of what the megatrends are and how they will shape our world. ^[8]


As an open economy, Cambodia is exposed to megatrends that happen at both regional and global levels. In its Recovery Plan and annual macro-economic forecast, the Government of Cambodia has explicitly acknowledged those megatrends, together with the opportunities and risks that they might bring.

Those include continuous and uncertain risks of future pandemics, tensions among super-powers, trade wars, disruption to regional logistics and trade, potential risks to the financial sector, and climate change. Megatrends associated with specific issues, including foreign investment, digital economy, data governance, social protection and labor, and climate change, are briefly discussed below.

The first megatrend relates to global and regional foreign investment. Globally, foreign direct investment has dramatically fallen due to the COVID-19 pandemic. But the significance of the decline varies by region. Developed countries and Africa were hit very hard, but the impact was felt less in Asia.^[9] For the ASEAN region, despite a fall in foreign direct investment especially in manufacturing and tourism in 2020, the long-term trend is encouraging.

⁸ See for instance the Economist's the World Ahead 2022 (<https://www.economist.com/the-world-ahead-2022/>) and WEF's

⁹ UNCTAD (2021) World Investment Report 2021: Investing in sustainable recovery. New York, USA.



Moreover, even during the pandemic, the region saw a rapid increase in investment in infrastructure-related industries such as electricity, ICT, transportation, and storage – underscoring the resilience of these industries in an economically challenging time.^[10]

The digital economy as a long-term driving force has been accelerated and solidified by the pandemic. This is very true at the global level but even more pronounced at the ASEAN level. According to a 2021 report by Google, Temasek, and Bain & Company titled ‘Roaring 20’s: The SEA Digital Decade’, the region is on the path to become a \$1 trillion digital economy by 2030. The report notes that this growth has been primarily driven by e-commerce and food delivery businesses, followed by online media, financial services, and online travel. Health and education-related technologies have also been on the rise. The report argues that the digital economy will shape the long-term trends in the region and that each ASEAN member state needs to put more effort into harnessing its potential.^[11] A related megatrend at the regional level is that more SMEs will adapt themselves to the digital economy to survive and progress.^[12]

Data is increasingly becoming a critical element in shaping the digital economy. The importance of data has been explicitly underscored in key reports such as the World Bank’s ‘2021 World Development Report’ and UNCTAD’s ‘Digital Economy Report 2021’. The latter focuses mainly on the issues of cross-border data flows and how they can affect development.^[13] At the ASEAN level, a similar focus is given with the links to promoting investment in digital technology and industries.^[14] With the advance of big data, an emerging long-term trend is how a government can use real-time data to identify key opportunities, challenges, and trends on various issues ranging from macro-economics, education, pandemic control, and others.^[15]

Two other relevant megatrends are how countries view and reform their social protection systems and labor policies. According to the ILO World Social Protection Report (2020-2022), the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed deep-seated inequalities and significant gaps in social protection coverage, comprehensiveness, and adequacy across all countries.

¹⁰ ASEAN and UNCTAD (2021) ASEAN investment report (2020-2021): Investing in Industry 4.0. Jakarta, Indonesia


¹¹ Google, Temasek and Bain & Company (2021) E-Economy SEA 2021: Roaring 20s: The SEA digital decade. USA.

¹² UOB (2021) ASEAN SME transformation study 2020. Singapore

¹³ UNCTAD (2021) Digital economy report 2021: Cross-border data flows and development: For whom the data flow. New York, USA.

¹⁴ ASEAN and UNCTAD (2021) ASEAN investment report (2020-2021): Investing in Industry 4.0. Jakarta, Indonesia.

¹⁵ The Economist (2021) Instant economics – A real time revolution will up-end the practice macro-economics (23rd Oct 2021 Edition).



But the crisis has also provoked an unparalleled social protection policy response and has spurred many governments to commit to building social protection in the long term.^[16] Relating to social protection is the need to review governments' labor and protection policies, especially among youth, including those in the informal sector.^[17]

Last but not least, climate change is undoubtedly a megatrend in our time. Many global initiatives have been implemented to address this issue, with regular reports and updates.^[18] Increasingly, many countries have taken a comprehensive approach to climate change, integrating it into various sectors of their economy. One good example is Australia with its Australia's Long-Term Emissions Reduction Plan that was adopted in 2021.

The Plan seeks to link technological and economic solutions to drive down technological cost, enable deployment at scale, seize opportunities in both new and traditional markets, and foster global cooperation.^[19] While there is still controversy as to how good the Plan is, it is expected that, as a megatrend, countries will need to integrate climate change more deeply into various aspects of their development trajectories.

2.2. Cambodia's Development Priorities

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have led to changes in development priorities both for Cambodia and ASEAN as a whole. Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the Government and key development partners have conducted a series of policy research to track the development and socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. In late 2021, the Government issued the Strategic Framework and Program for Cambodia's Economic Recovery (2021-2023).^[20]

Development partners have also published research reports and policy recommendations on specific recovery measures. At the ASEAN level, the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF) was also adopted at the 37th ASEAN summit in November 2020. By and large, the latest studies and policy documents on the COVID-19 situation and its economic impacts in Cambodia offer similar conclusions and recommendations.


¹⁶ ILO (2021) World Social Protection Report (2020-2022). Geneva.

¹⁷ ILO (2021) World employment and social outlook trends (2022). Geneva.

¹⁸ For instance, please see: <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/reports>

¹⁹ Australian Government (2021) Australia with its Australia's Long-Term Emissions Reduction Plan adopted in 2021, Canberra.

²⁰ RGC (2021) Strategic Framework and Program for Cambodia's Economic Recovery (2021-2023)



Firstly, compared to many other countries in the world and in the ASEAN region, Cambodia has done well in controlling the pandemic. As of December 2021, the country has about 120,000 reported cases and about 3,000 recorded deaths. However, the most impressive achievement is the high vaccination rate – as of December 2021, almost 90 percent of the total population of 16 million have been vaccinated against COVID-19. This has allowed Cambodia to implement gradual economic opening and adaptation to the new normal of living with COVID-19.^[21]

Both the Government and development partners have conducted various research on the impact of COVID-19 on the economy. The Government and key multilateral donors such as the World Bank, IMF, and ADB have regularly issued and adjusted their updates to capture the economic prospects of the country, as well as the region and the world. These studies tend to use a similar set of macro-economic data and cross-reference one another. Therefore, they largely come up with similar findings.

In addition, some studies focus on specific sectors or sub-sectors. For instance, The Asia Foundation commissioned and collaborated with local research organizations to conduct two separate survey studies of the impact of COVID-19 on micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in the tourism sector and households in Cambodia.^[22] A few other studies focus on fiscal space, social protection, and digital skills.^[23]

The Government's recovery plan sums up many critical points about lessons learned, emerging risks, and opportunities in the post-COVID-19 period. Cambodia's economic recovery plan (2021-2023) identifies six lessons learned and eight points about the resilience of Cambodia's economy after having gone through the pandemic. It also offers seven points of overall strategies to help in economic recovery. These points, summarized in the box below, are similar to what has been identified in the studies conducted by development partners.

²¹ RGC (2021) Strategic Framework and Program for Cambodia's Economic Recovery (2021-2023), World Bank (2020) Cambodia Economic Update: Restrained recovery, AMRO (2021) AMRO annual consultation report – Cambodia 2021.

²² The Asia Foundation (2021) Revisiting the Pandemic: Rapid survey on the impact of COVID-19 on MSMEs in the tourism sector and households in Cambodia, available here: <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/revisiting-the-pandemic-rapid-survey-on-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-msmes-in-the-tourism-sector-and-households-in-cambodia/>

²³ Examples include World Bank (2020) Cambodia Economic Update: Restrained recovery; UNDP (2020) Meeting the costs and maximizing the impact of social protection in Cambodia; UNDP (2021) How Industry 4.0 can boost Cambodia's economy after COVID-19: Opportunities for industrial upgrading and equitable development; CADT, CDRI, et al (2021) Demand for and supply of digital skills in Cambodia.

Box 1: Key points of the Government's Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Plan^[24]

The Strategic Framework and Program for Cambodia's Economic Recovery (2021-2023) recognize the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also see opportunities for the country's development in the 'new normal'. It lays out the economic recovery plan based on the following key lessons learned:

- Cambodia's economic structure is vulnerable to external changes and demand shocks,
- Social safety nets are an effective intervention tool for ensuring people's welfare during crises;
- There is a need to improve the current fiscal and monetary policy;
- The big informal sector has created difficulty for intervention reach out during the crisis;
- The Government's savings have been a key financing source for emergency response during the crisis; and
- There is a need to further reform the taxation system to make it more modern, robust, and responsive to the changing socio-economic situation.

The Strategy also sees the strengths and opportunities for the economy, as listed below:

- The health sector has been able to build its capacity to effectively respond to the pandemic;
- The balance of payments has remained strong;
- The result of state revenue collection has performed better than expected;
- Public debt has remained in good condition, leaving room for more financing mobilization
- The financial sector has not shown serious signs of risks;
- Agriculture remains a potential sector for growth, support for food

²⁴ RGC (2021) Strategic Framework and Program for Cambodia's Economic Recovery (2021-2023)

- security, and absorption of labor;
- Cambodia has performed well in terms of its global, regional, and bi-lateral economic integration; and
- The adoption of digital technology has rapidly increased in the last few years.

The Strategy's objective is to restore the economy in the immediate- and medium-term to improve its potential and resilience for ensuring more sustainable and inclusive development in the long run. The objective is to be achieved by relying on three pillars, known as the 3 Rs: recovery, reform, and resilience. For the period from 2021-2023, the following strategic priorities are offered:

- Economic recovery by focusing on agriculture, agroindustry, tourism, garment, and non-garment industry;
- Reform to improve economic diversification and competitiveness focusing on regional economic cooperation, implementation of the new investment law, the energy sector, an improved business environment, transport, and logistics;
- Strengthen resilience by improving the digital sector, SME development, skill development, education sector, social protection, health sector, climate change adaptation, and green growth.

The Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF) is the leading agency in formulating, and in some cases implementing and monitoring, the various policies related to COVID-19. In addition to being the member of key committees, the Ministry also plays a hands-on role in drafting various policy measures including support to SMEs, strengthening national revenue collection, and re-prioritizing national budget allocation. As will be shown throughout this report, MEF has played increasingly important roles in policy process in Cambodia, including data governance. MEF's authority and influence, this report argues, is so expansive and critical that any policy and reform initiatives need to have its buy-in and support to have a higher chance of success. Given its importance, it is helpful to provide more information about this central ministry early on, as presented in the box below.

Box 2: The Roles of a Finance Ministry – International Practices and the Case of Cambodia

International literature suggests that having a strong central finance agency (namely, a Ministry of Finance), is an important and favorable factor for managing a country's economy. This is because the ministry is responsible for developing policy on and implementing the core finance functions of the state, which in turn determine the shape and course of economic development. Literature also suggests developed countries such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, have stronger Ministries of Finance if compared to developing countries. However, there are also cases such as Australia where, for political reasons, the central finance ministry is made weaker by splitting into separate ministries (Finance and Treasury).^[25]

As an international practice, a Ministry of Finance performs three main categories of core functions. They are 1) policy functions (macro-fiscal forecasting and analysis, fiscal policy formulation, fiscal risks analysis, interface between monetary and fiscal policy, international economic and financial relations, tax policy, budget preparation, and execution); 2) operational functions (treasury and cash management, debt management, public procurement, collection of taxes and customs duties; and 3) the functions of formulating, discussing and agreeing on new policies and procedures to modernize public financial management (e.g., accounting, development of public-private-partnership (PPP) and reform of local government finance).^[26]

In Cambodia, the MEF is given a similarly broad range of roles and authorities, as indicated in the international practices. Its official mission and roles are provided in sub-decree #488 dated 2013. The mission is to lead and manage the economic and financial sector of the Kingdom of Cambodia in order to achieve economic development and promote people living standards based on market economy principles and equity. It has a list of about 25 major roles, all similar to the three main categories of functions provided in international literature. In terms of organizational structure, MEF has 13 general departments at the central level, line departments, and provincial treasuries in all 25 Capital and provinces, tax branches down to district, municipal, and khan level, and customs branches in various provinces.^[27]

²⁵ Allen et al (2013) The international handbook of public financial management, Washington DC

²⁶ Allen, R., and P. Kohnert. 2012. "Anatomy of a Finance Minister," Mimeo. Washington, DC: IMF.

²⁷ RGC (2013) Sub-decree #488 on the organizational structure and functioning of MEF.

MEF is probably the best ministry in terms of its ability to mobilize young educated graduates and provide good incentives for them. In the last five years, it has been observed that the ministry has recruited many young officials (in their 30s or early 40s), many of whom graduated from abroad or have experience in the private sector. These young technocrats are responsible for various technical works from data analysis, policy and guideline drafting, review of budget proposals, and operating ICT departments. They are also provided some extra financial incentives as well as opportunities to attend various capacity development events and training. In their regular work, they are also regularly exposed to technical meetings where they can learn from their senior officials as well as technical advisors employed by international donors.

Out of necessity, MEF has strong interests in not only policy formulation but also M&E, data use, and digital governance. Issuing new policies and guidelines is almost routine work for MEF. But beyond that, as a central ministry, MEF also monitors the implementation of the many policies that have been put out. For this task, this research finds that MEF is in constant need of a better M&E system and data. In addition, given the magnitude and complexity of its job, the ministry needs to keep improving its internal effectiveness to avoid becoming a bottleneck in the system. As such, this research also found, out of necessity, MEF is in strong favor of adopting more ICT solutions to support its functions.

2.3. ASEAN Recovery Plan and Cambodia's Chairmanship in 2022

Cooperation at the ASEAN level is critical for Cambodia. This is in addition to a few other external cooperation such as with China, South Korea, and those entailed by the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP).^[28] There are both political and economic aspects to the regional engagement at the ASEAN level. The political ones include issues like how ASEAN will navigate through the great power's competition and address the political issues in Myanmar. The economic priorities involve mainly how the region will manage to recover its economy out of the COVID-19 pandemic.^[29] This section will focus on the economic side.

ASEAN economic integration and partnership during the post-COVID-19 period is emphasized by the Government and the ASEAN Secretariat. There are many similarities between the Government's economic recovery plan and the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF) regarding their priorities.


²⁸ Lim H., (2021) ASEAN's contribution to regional peace and stability: A Cambodian perspective in Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022: Priorities and challenges.

²⁹ ASEAN (2020) ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF) – Implementation Plan.

The ACRF focuses on five broad strategies, including 1) enhancing health systems, 2) strengthening human security, 3) maximizing the potential of the intra-ASEAN market and broader economic integration, 4) accelerating inclusive digital transformation, and 5) advancing towards a more sustainable and resilient future. The table below summarizes selected priorities, initiatives, and programs under each strategy.

Table 1: ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF) – Selected key points

Strategy	Selected priorities, initiatives, and programs
Enhancing health systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Managing big data analytics and visualization for risk assessment on communicable diseases, emerging/re-emerging infectious diseases,– Strengthening timely dissemination and communication of information and sharing of relevant data across countries for regional planning purposes,– Finalization of the Regional Strategic and Action plan for ASEAN Vaccine Security and Self-Reliance for 2021-2025,– Provision of scholarships for students from ASEAN member states to study health and related fields of science.
Strengthening human security	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Further strengthening and broadening of social protection and social welfare, especially for vulnerable groups, SMEs, the informal sector, and migrant workers,– Monitoring impact and gathering data on social protection using the ASEAN Social Protection Results Framework,– Promoting regional dialogues and joint analysis on urgent social protection responses through peer learning and dissemination,



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Promoting skills development, especially for rural women and rural youth, with more focus on digital and 21st-century skills (following the recommendations from the TAF Rapid Assessment COVID-19 in ASEAN: Impacts on Social Protection, Labour and Education), – Enhancing gender data and evidence on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on women and girls, – Promoting media literacy and information literacy to combat fake news ^[30].
Maximizing the potential of the intra-ASEAN market and broader economic integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Strengthening supply chain connectivity and resilience, – Exploring the possibility of establishing an ASEAN database of manufacturers and exporters for essential goods to promote supply chain resilience in a time of crisis, – Accelerating sectoral recovery (tourism, MSMEs) and safeguarding employment in most affected sectors, – Continuous information sharing/ exchange on business-related policies and measures introduced by ASEAN member states in response to COVID-19 (as presented in the Policy Insights on Enterprise Policy Response to COVID-19 in ASEAN: Measures to Boost MSME Resilience).
Accelerating inclusive digital transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Promote e-commerce and the digital economy by providing a digital platform and related policy for promoting MSME digital upskill and providing digital technology and fintech to access market, – Implementing the Go Digital ASEAN, with support from The Asia Foundation and Google to expand economic opportunities across ASEAN, – Developing the ASEAN Data Management Framework (DMF) under the ASEAN Framework on Digital Data Governance.

³⁰ This is to be in line with AMRI Framework and Joint Declaration to Minimize the Harmful Effects of Fake News.

Advancing a more sustainable and resilient future

- Promoting sustainable development in all dimensions
- Facilitating the transition to sustainable energy
- Building green infrastructure and addressing essential infrastructure gaps,
- Developing ASEAN guidelines on the utilization of digital technologies for the ASEAN food and agricultural sector.

In 2022, Cambodia will be chair of the ASEAN summit for the third time. Cambodia became the last ASEAN Member in April 1999. Since then, it has chaired the ASEAN summit two times, the first time in 2002 and the second time in 2012. The chairmanship role is rotated annually based on the alphabetical order of the English names of Member States. A Member State assuming the Chairmanship shall chair the ASEAN Summit and related summits, the ASEAN Coordinating Council, the three ASEAN Community Councils, relevant ASEAN Sectoral Ministerial Bodies and senior officials, and the Committee of Permanent Representatives.^[31] In 2022, Cambodia will have the honor of serving as the ASEAN chair for the third time under the theme: ‘ASEAN A.C.T.: Addressing Challenges Together.’^[32]

According to the ASEAN website, the summit will have a specific agenda. As the chair, Cambodia seeks to strengthen ASEAN’s engagement with the wider region and regional responses to the impacts and uncertainties posed by regional and global challenges. These include the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and sustainable development, rivalries between major powers, protectionism, territorial disputes, trade wars and technology rivalries, and other traditional and non-traditional security threats.^[33]

Many books, articles, and opinion pieces have been recently written about Cambodia’s 2022 chairmanship. Examples include the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) and the Asian Vision Institute (AVI)’s book on Cambodia’s ASEAN Chairmanship 2021: Priorities and Challenges (2021)^[34] and Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace’s (CICP) book on Cambodia’s Chairmanship of ASEAN: Challenging Perceptions, Concretizing Consolidations (2021).^[35] In addition, various articles and opinion pieces have been written and published on the websites of both local and international media outlines. These publications touch on both political and economic dimensions. For this study, however, it will only pick on the economic aspects, and more specifically, on data-related issues.

³¹ <https://asean.org/category/chairmanship/>

³² <https://asean.org/asean-chairmanship-2022-cambodia/>

³³ <https://asean.org/asean-chairmanship-2022-cambodia/>

³⁴ KAS and AVI (2021) Cambodia’s ASEAN Chairmanship 2021: Priorities and Challenges

³⁵ CICP (2021) Cambodia’s Chairmanship of ASEAN: Challenging Perceptions, Concretizing Consolidations

3. Policy Process and Data Use in Cambodia

Understanding key features of the policy process in Cambodia is the first step toward answering how it can benefit from better data use. These include how a public policy is defined in the Cambodian context; the process of making, financing, implementing, and monitoring it; key stakeholders involved; and critical factors that shape its quality and outcomes. This section will illustrate some of these points. It does not intend to be exhaustive but focuses more on the key rules, guidelines, and factors relevant to Cambodia's policy process and data use.

3.1. Defining a Public Policy in Cambodia

Before defining public policy, background on Cambodia's public sector is a starting point to understand the context. Cambodia is a democratic country based on a parliamentary political system. Its public sector is divided into the national and sub-national levels.

The national-level administration is composed of line ministries (including their provincial line departments), public administration enterprises (PAEs), and state enterprises. The sub-national level consists of three tiers, including Capital and Provincial level (CP); District, Municipality and Khan (DMK); and Commune/Sangkat (CS).^[36]

The term public policy is not clearly defined in Cambodia or in international literature. Internationally, a public policy refers to “a definite course or method of action selected (by government, institution, group, or individual) from among alternatives and in the light of given conditions to guide and, usually, to determine present and future decisions.”^[37]

In Cambodia, the definition of public policy is found in a notification by the Council of Minister (CoM) issued in 2011. It defines public policy as ‘a process or principle of actions as approved or proposed by an institution, a political party, company, or individuals.’^[38]

This study defines public policy and processes by synthesizing relevant points from different official documents. The study found no one official guideline focusing on the topic. Instead, because the policy processes in Cambodia have been evolving, their corresponding official guidelines have been developed to reflect specific purposes and types of policies. However, specific official documents are identified and used as references in this report from this research. They are:

³⁶ How the public sector is defined in Cambodia is largely in line with international definition. Please see IMF (2011) on the system of national account (SNA) on the definition of public sector

³⁷ INASP (2016), Evidence-informed policy making toolkit (p. 18)

³⁸ CoM (2011) Notification on the preparation of policy, strategy, and workplan document.

- CoM's notification on preparing policy, strategy, and work plan documents (2011);
- The Government's guideline on preparing the National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP);^[39]
- MEF's guideline on preparing Budget Strategic Plan (BSP) (2011)^[40]; and
- MEF's annual circular on preparing Budget Strategic Plan (BSP).^[41]

Based on the official documents and key informant interviews, this study defines and categorizes a policy as follows:

- A policy is a document that identifies long term (3 to 5 years) and medium-term (3 years) policy direction and priorities for the Government and its agencies;
- A policy document would follow the standard content provided in the 2011 RGC notification. The standard content consists of visions, goals, objectives, strategies, stakeholders, key actions, M&E frameworks, and financial resources; and
- The policy document can be called policy, strategy, program, or framework, as long as it follows the timeframe and standard content mentioned earlier.

A policy varies in terms of its characteristics depending on whether it is long-term or medium-term. Long-term policies include national development policies, cross-sectoral policies, and ministerial policies. All cover five years or more and need to be signed by the Prime Minister. Medium-term policies cover three-years and are divided into two sub-types: 1) the macro-economic and multi-year fiscal framework, which is updated annually by the MEF and 2) the three-year rolling Budget Strategic Plan (BSP) prepared by line ministries (LMs) and agencies who are considered 'budget entities.'^[42] The BSP needs to be signed by a minister or the head of the budget entity.

There are hierarchies and logical links between long-term policies, medium-term policies, and the annual budget. The main objective of a long-term policy is to set long-term development directions and priorities either for the whole government, more than one ministry, or just one ministry. The main objective of the three-year rolling BSP is to link long-term policy priorities to annual program budget allocation (as illustrated in the diagram below). In this regard, the BSP is partly a policy and partly an operational plan of a policy. However, in this report, the BSP is categorized as a policy because it meets the required timeframe and standard content listed above. The preparation of the BSP follows the standard guideline issued by the MEF in 2011, which is now being revised.

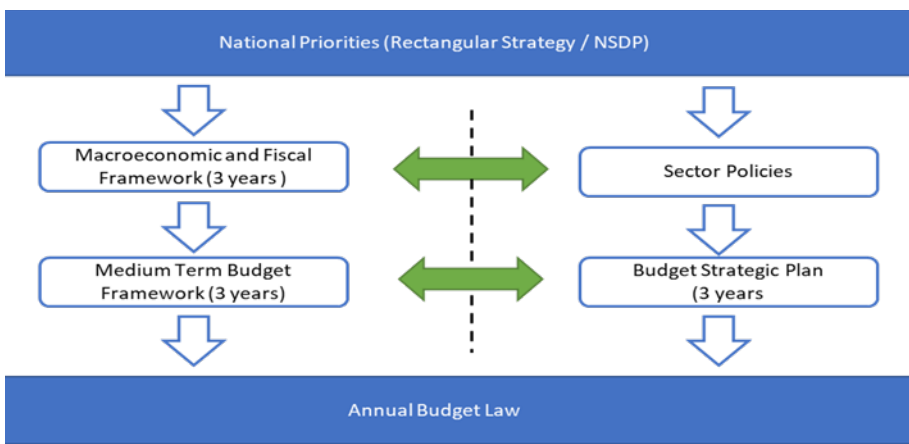
³⁹ RGC (2013) Guideline on preparing the NSDP (2014-2018)

⁴⁰ MEF (2011) Guideline on preparing Budget Strategic Plan (BSP)

⁴¹ MEF (2020) Circular on preparing Budget Strategic Plan (BSP) for 2021.

⁴² A budget entity is defined as a budget holder, i.e., an agency that receives budget from the government and is held accountable for the use of that budget.

Figure 1: Hierarchy and Logical Linkages Among Key Policies and Plans in Cambodia




A policy can be understood in terms of its coverage, process, and engagement from stakeholders. As illustrated in the table below, a long-term policy usually covers the mandate of the whole government, multi-ministries, or just one ministry. It is adopted only once, however, and subject to only two rounds of M&E, mid-term (after 2.5 years) and end-term (after 5 years of implementation). The macro-economic and multi-year fiscal framework is a three-year rolling policy document which is prepared by the MEF for the whole government. The BSP, on the other hand, is agency-specific and is supposed to be updated annually. The MEF Guidelines also indicate the need to have annual M&E on the BSP implementation but mostly at the output level. Engagement from development partners and NGOs are expected in both the long-term and medium policy process. However, as discussed in the next section, in reality the level of engagement varies.

Table 2: Hierarchy of Policies Documents in Cambodia

Key points	Long term policy	Medium-term strategic plan
Covered period	– 3 to 5 years	– Three years

Key policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – National development policies (e.g., Rectangular Strategy, National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP)) – Cross-sectoral policies (e.g., social protection, public financial management reform, logistics, energy) – Ministerial policies (e.g., education, health, agriculture sector strategy) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The macro-economic and multi-year fiscal framework – Budget strategic plans (BSP) which is a three-year rolling plan
Key objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – To set long term development directions and priorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – To link long term policy priorities to annual program budget allocation
Key content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Background, visions, goals, objectives, strategies, stakeholders, key actions, M&E frameworks, financial resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Background, visions, goals, objectives, strategies, stakeholders, key actions, M&E frameworks, financial resources
Updating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Adopted only once 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Updated annually
Guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – RGC Guideline on NSDP (2013) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – MEF Guideline on BSP (2011)
Agency level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Government level (signed by the Prime Minister) – Ministerial level (signed by ministers) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Ministerial and budget entity level (signed by ministers or agency heads)
Engagement of non-state actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Development partners providing technical assistance – NGOs participating and providing inputs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Ministries and budget entities conducting it internally – NGO participation limited but expected to be more active



Formulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Led by a technical working group with participation from key ministries, development partners, and NGOs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Led by a working group with participation from key departments of the agencies and non-state actors
Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Operationalized through the three-year budget strategic plans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Operationalized through the annual program-based budgets
M&E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – M&E conducted on output and outcome – M&E conducted for midterm (2.5 years) and end-term 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – M&E conducted mainly on output level (following the MEF's Guideline on BSP) – M&E conducted and updated annually

In the functioning of the public sector, policies and legal documents complement each other, but they are not the same. This distinction is found in international practice as well as in Cambodia. Policies outline what a government is going to do and what it can achieve for society as a whole. Policies also suggest what a government does not intend to do. Policies are not laws, but they can indicate if new laws, legal instruments, or guidelines are needed to implement the policies. A policy does not imply the need to comply, while a legal document or guideline instructs people what to do.

Legal documents and technical guidelines play critical roles in the policy process in Cambodia. In 2013, the Government issued a circular to adopt a Guideline on the Procedures and Measures for Developing Legal Documents. According to the Guideline, legal documents include laws, sub-decrees, Prakas, decisions, and circulars. Laws need to be adopted by the National Assembly, sub-decrees by the Prime Minister, and Prakas by one or more ministries.

A decision or circular can be adopted either at the Government or ministerial level.^[43] Below these legal documents, government agencies also issue technical guidelines for internal use, the public, or certain affected groups.

⁴³ RGC (2013) Guideline on the Procedures and Measures for Developing Legal Documents.

Box 3: Key Stakeholders and Process for Formulating and Approving a Legal Document^[44]

Based on the Government's Guideline issued in 2013, all laws and legal documents need to be drafted according to the following standard processes. The process begins with a concerned ministry who, based on key inputs from various state and non-state stakeholders, start drafting the needed policy. The actual drafting is often done by one or more technical departments of the ministry, with the support of a technical working group, and to be reviewed by the Legal Department of the Ministry.


The line ministry needs to consult the draft laws and/or legal regulations with other ministries, sub-national administrations, and non-state actors. It also needs to consult with the MEF on matters relating to the national budget. All draft laws and legal documents need to follow standard templates depending on their type and hierarchy (e.g., law, sub-decrees, Prakas, circular, and decision).

The ministry needs to submit the draft laws and draft legal documents to the Council of Ministers, together with supporting explanatory notes. The note needs to also indicate the results and comments from the consultation process. The General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers shall review the submitted drafts before including them in the agenda of the Council of Ministers' technical meetings, inter-ministerial meetings, and final review meetings.

While the hierarchy of policy and legal documents has been largely defined, certain aspects are still unclear and subject to subjective interpretation during implementation. The first is the unclear distinction and relative importance between a policy and a legal document. This issue happens especially for people at the implementation level. Year-round, new policies and instructions are handed down, and at times it is not clear which are policy direction, which are legal instructions, and which to follow when those documents conflict with one another – a situation not uncommon in practice. From key informant interviews, in such a situation, general guidance is to follow a legal instruction rather than a policy direction. Yet, in practice, what seems to matter more is who issued the document and the level of their influence.

For decentralized sub-national administrations (SNAs), what constitutes a policy is not clearly defined. On the one hand, SNAs are expected to follow and contribute to the overall national development priorities.

⁴⁴RGC (2013) Guideline on the Procedures and Measures for Developing Legal Documents.




They also operate and are subject to reform direction as stipulated in the decentralization policy. On the other hand, however, they are expected to collect and analyze information on local needs and reflect them in their five-year and three-year development plans. In this report, these five-year and three-year plans are considered a form of policy. They have most of the components of a policy, including development visions and objectives for each locality, a needs assessment, resource needs, and M&E indicators.

3.2. Stakeholders and Mechanisms

By definition, a public policy process in any country involves many stakeholders. Cambodia is no different. The first group of stakeholders includes state actors, which can be grouped into the executive and legislative, and into the national and sub-national levels. There are also non-state actors, including development partners, non-government organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), the private sector, research institutions, and citizens in general. To help coordinate these actors, various mechanisms are created at different levels and for different purposes.

The executive branch of the Government is the primary actor in policy formulation, implementation, and M&E. The agencies within the executive branch are grouped into three groups of agencies: 1) line ministries such as Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, etc., 2) central ministries such as Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF), Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Planning, and 3) the Council of Minister (CoM). Sub-national administrations (SNAs) are also considered a part of the executive branch. As of 2020, Cambodia has 39 ministries (which also manage their provincial line departments), 28 public administrations of establishments (PAEs), 13 state enterprises (in addition to the National Bank of Cambodia), and three levels of SNAs (1 Capital and 24 provinces, 203 DMK, and 1,650 communes/Sangkats).

As a principle, participation and consultation with key stakeholders is a key feature of the policy process in Cambodia. However, the list and roles of those stakeholders vary. In the case of the NSDP, according to the RGC, the Ministry of Planning, MEF, the Council for Development of Cambodia (CDC), and the Supreme National Economic Council (SNEC) play the leading roles, while other ministries participate. Development partners and NGOs are expected to provide inputs through various technical working group mechanisms (see below). For the BSP, an internal budget working group of each agency leads the process. The following section will provide more details.



Councils, committees, and technical working groups have been helpful for coordination, but sometimes they have also created coordination challenges. It is a common practice in the public sector to create technical working groups and committees to ensure sufficient engagement from key stakeholders and collect technical inputs, starting from those within the Government. The arrangements have been helpful, especially on issues affecting the everyday lives of the citizens. However, it is observed that such arrangements have also been the source of even more coordination challenges and blurring of accountability lines. This challenge is particularly pronounced in the case of cross-sectoral policies such as youth development, decentralization, social protection, etc. The case studies in Section 5 will illustrate this point.

Specific principles and mechanisms have been put in place to guide the coordination between state and non-state actors in the policy process. The information can be found in the Development Cooperation and Partnership Strategy (DCPS). According to the document adopted in 2019, the engagement shall follow a set of critical principles, including ownership, partnership, and results. Specific mechanisms and tools for coordination are also provided, including sectoral technical working groups, Government-NGO consultative meetings, provincial partnership dialogues, joint monitoring indicators (JMIs), and Official Development Assistance (ODA), and NGO databases.^[45]

Development partners, especially multi-lateral ones, play critical roles in providing technical assistance to the Government. These include, for instance, the World Bank and IMF on macro-economic and monetary issues, as well as fiscal policy; and the ADB and UN agencies on a range of social development issues like social protection, youth development, etc. Responsible government agencies work closely with these partners and make an official request for technical assistance. Once agreed, technical assistants, both international and local, are recruited to conduct studies and offer recommendations. The study recruited teams, given their official terms of reference, are provided with necessary data and the latest policy documents. It is also observed that, increasingly, the Government officials require that the studies not only focus on Cambodia's cases but also insights from international and regional practices.

In terms of knowledge transfer, young technocrats put in charge of coordinating and supporting the studies benefit the most from technical assistance projects. It is observed that the distribution of the young talent pool is not the same across ministries or even in the same ministry. The MEF, as discussed earlier, has a high number of young technocrats. But even for MEF, some departments seem to have fewer compared to others.

⁴⁵ RGC (2019) Development Cooperation and Partnership Strategy (2019-2023)

3.3. Key Stages in the Policy Process and Data Use


The policy process in Cambodia involves three main stages. These include policy formulation, policy implementation, and policy M&E. Despite some variations, these stages are in line with the international concept and practice on public policy.^[46] It is also important to note that, in practice, the policy process is not linear but messy and iterative. There are also many sub-steps and tasks in each stage, with key stakeholders and required data. The table below provides a summary.

Table 3: Process and Data use in Different Types of the Policy Process

		Long-term policy	Macro-economic/ MTFF	BSP by LMs/agencies
Formulation	Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Cross-governmentt: starts with MOP or inter-ministerial TWGs; signed by the PM – LM: starts with ministerial TWG, signed by the Minister 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Led by MEF, MOP, NBC – Signed by the PM – Updated annually (in March) – Inputs from DP/NGOs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Led by LM/agencies, approved by MEF – Updated annually (in May) – Inputs from DP/NGOs (limited)
	Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Surveys by NIS, admin data, inputs from DPs/NGOs – Publicly disseminated (not all) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – National accounts and macro-economic indicators – Revenue/expenditure forecast – Publicly disseminated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Led by LM/agencies, approved by MEF – Updated annually (in May) – Inputs from DP/NGOs (limited)

⁴⁶ INASP (2016), Evidence-informed policy making toolkit

Implementation	Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Cross-government: Assigned to ministries/agencies for specific tasks/activities – LM: Assigned to departments – Inputs from DPs/NGOs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Regular monitoring of macro performance – Led by MEF, NBC – Inputs from DP/NGOs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Regular monitoring – Led by LM/agencies, approved by MEF – Inputs from DP/NGOs (limited)
	Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Admin data, Census/Surveys by NIS, Inputs from DP/NGOs – Publicly disseminated (not all) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Macro-economic and fiscal data by MEF, NBC, MOP – Publicly disseminated (limited) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – LM's admin data, FMIS (for budget data) – Not publicly disseminated
M&E	Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Cross-government: Midterm, end-term – Ministry: Midterm, end-term (not regularly done for all LM) – Inputs from DP 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Annually, mid-term, end-term (part of PFMRP) – Led by MEF, MOP, NBC – Inputs from DPs (WB, IMF...) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Annually conducted – LM's admin data, FMIS (for budget data) – Inputs from DPs/NGOs
	Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Cross-government: Census/Surveys by NIS, admin data, Inputs from DPs/NGOs – Ministry: Admin data, surveys by NIS, Inputs from DPs/NGOs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Macro-economic/fiscal data by MEF, NBC, MOP; DPs' inputs – Publicly disseminated (limited) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – LM's admin data, FMIS (for budget data), – Publicly disseminated (e.g., annual progress reports)



The Government agencies use different types of data throughout the policy process. The details on data production, sharing, and use will be discussed in the next section. In this section, to be noted is that there are at least three types of data used, namely, 1) national census and sample surveys conducted by the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), 2) administrative data produced as part of the regular functioning of government agencies, and 3) data and research collected and conducted by development partners and NGOs. As detailed in Section 4, the NIS has made an effort to collect and store all the different data sources using a web-based platform called CamStat (formerly known as CamInfo). This initiative will help improve public data access and sharing in the future, although currently, it still has many technical challenges.

3.3.1. Policy Formulation Stage


The process and data use in the policy formulation vary from one case to another. As an international practice, it might include key sub-steps, including agenda setting, problem identification, option discussions, and decision-making ^[47] In Cambodia, the detailed process varies by type of policy. For the long-term cross-government policies such as the Rectangular Strategy and the NSDP, the process is led mostly by the Ministry of Planning (MOP) and MEF, together with other agencies such as the National Bank of Cambodia (NBC), the Council for the Development of Cambodia (CDC), line ministries, development partners, and other non-state actors. For these policies, the Government relies primarily on national census and surveys from the NIS, complemented by administrative data from line ministries (LM), as well as inputs from development partners and NGOs.

The Government's long-term policies are linked to the global development agenda, such as the Cambodian Sustainable Development Goals (CSDGs). The Rectangular Strategy serves as the government's political platform for the whole mandate, whereas the NSDP is seen as a government-wide operationalization of that political platform. The NSDP document specifies actors, policy areas, estimated resource needs, and M&E frameworks. Many of the NSDP policy objectives and indicators are linked to the CSDGs. According to the RGC CSDG progress report, 40% of the CSDG indicators have been aligned and included in the NSDP indicator list. ^[48]

The preparation of the macro-economic and medium-term financial framework (MTFF) is led mostly by the MEF, MOP, and NBC. The document is a three-year rolling policy that covers the whole Government. It is used to guide the preparation of the Medium-Term Budget Framework (MTBF) and the BSP at LM and agencies level.

⁴⁷ INASP (2016), Evidence-informed policy making toolkit

⁴⁸ RGC (2020) CSDG progress report



The Government, with technical support from development partners such as the IMF and World Bank, has developed models for updating the national accounts and forecasting of national revenue (both tax and non-tax), debts, and expenditure at the aggregate level. More data on the macro-economic and fiscal framework has been made available on the MEF website (General Department of Policy)^[49] and NBC's websites.^[50]

The BSP is a three-year rolling plan to be prepared by a budget entity. Currently, those budget entities include all line ministries, line departments, and Capital and provincial administrations. By preparing their own BSP, the budget entities are given more authority over their plans and learn to take a medium-term strategic view when preparing those plans. Line ministries and agencies refer to the medium-term fiscal framework issued by the MEF (in March) and rely mainly on their administrative data when preparing the BSP. Currently, inputs from development partners and NGOs in ministerial BSP is limited, partly because of the tight time-frame (only two months from April to May). The MEF is considering giving more time for BSP preparation. It is also noted that not much data regarding BSP has been made publicly available.

The BSP is a technically sophisticated document. It includes both the strategic dimension over the next three years and operational dimensions that focus on the annual workplan and costs. For instance, according to the MEF guideline, all BSPs need to present 1) policy objectives, 2) problem and needs assessments, 3) policy options, 4) cost, and 5) M&E indicators and targets.^[51] These key points, where applicable, need to be disaggregated by programs, sub-programs, and by years. However, the actual practices differ depending on the capacity and resources of each line ministry and agency. From existing studies, most BSPs tend to be weak in the areas of costing and M&E (especially indicator and target selection).^[52]

Existing studies find that the linkage between the three-year BSP and the NSDP is still limited. As mentioned earlier, there is a supposed hierarchy and linkage from the NSDP to sectoral policies and to the BSP. A study in 2015 by the MOP found that the alignment of policy and planning documents between the NSDP and major sector strategic documents is good, but less so when it comes to the link between NSDP and the BSP (and therefore annual budget plan).


The study further explains that the disconnection might be due to the institutional setup in which the NSDP and sectoral policies have more engagement from MOP, whereas the BSPs are developed mainly under the leadership of MEF and with limited engagement from MOP.^[53]

⁴⁹ Please visit: <https://gdp.mef.gov.kh/>

⁵⁰ Please visit: https://www.nbc.org.kh/english/publications/economic_and_monetary_statistics.php

⁵¹ MEF (2011) Guideline on preparing Budget Strategic Plan (BSP)

⁵² EU (2020) Assessment of the Budget Strategic Plan (BSP) of selected ministries



The policy and planning process at SNAs are clearly defined. However, the main challenge is its allocated budget. As mentioned earlier, an SNA five-year plan is in this report considered a form of policy. SNAs are required to follow a clearly defined local participatory planning process, where local people (especially vulnerable groups) and non-state actors can participate. Despite some limitations, existing research suggests that SNAs have largely been complied with this requirement.

They have also used the data from the Commune Database (CDB) when preparing their 5-year plan. The main challenge, however, is the limited annual budget allocated to SNAs. Although increased over time, the overall share of public expenditure placed under SNAs account for roughly 10 percent compared to the total national expenditure. This percentage is among the lowest compared to other countries. ^[54]

MEF, in coordination with other stakeholders, has driven most reforms on policy formulation. On the long-term policies, although by law the Ministry of Planning should take the lead, increasingly it is the MEF through the General Department of Policy, SNEC, and the CDC, who take the lead. MEF is also behind the development of cross-sectoral policies such as those focusing on the digital economy, social protection, logistics, etc. MEF is even more hands-on when it comes to medium-term policy formulation, which is more closely linked to budget-related issues.

As of now, the Ministry is leading five main Public Financial Management (PFM) reform policies, including 1) Budget System Reform Strategy (BSRS) (2018-2025), 2) Budget System Reform Strategy for Sub-National Administrations (SNA-BSRS) (2019-2023), 3) Reform Strategy on Public Investment Management (PIM) (2019-2025), 4) Reform Strategy on Public Procurement System (RSPPS) (2019-2025), and 5) Revenue Mobilization Strategy (2019-2023). These reforms will change the way macro-economic and fiscal frameworks as well as BSPs are prepared. They will also push for more public dissemination of budget-related data.

3.3.2. Policy implementation

The boundary and scope of the policy implementation stage are not always clear-cut. On the one hand, what is considered as the formulation stage of a policy of a ministry or the five-year development plan of a sub-national administration is actually the implementation of the national policy such as the NSDP. On the other hand, policy implementation is also about ‘actually doing’ what was planned in the policy document, whether it is a national or ministerial, long or short term.

⁵³ MOP (2015) Summary assessment of the M&E system for NSDP implementation.

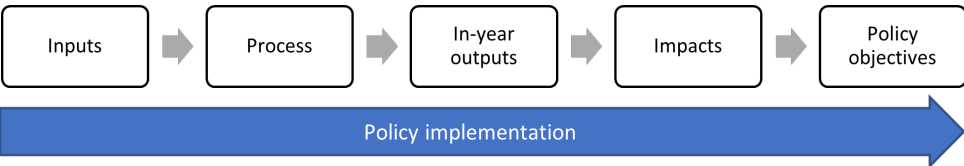
⁵⁴ World Bank (2021) Intergovernmental fiscal architecture.

In this regard, policy implementation is technically about making action plans, budgeting, and generating expected outputs and outcomes as outlined in the policy documents.


For the long- and medium-policies, the implementation tasks are assigned to responsible ministries and agencies. Usually, those policies have an annex section with an action plan table indicating which ministries (for national policies) or departments (for ministerial policies) are responsible for carrying out specific tasks. In some cases, the table also indicates indicators and targets. In a few cases, it also shows the required budget. As a part of their implementation, those responsible ministries and agencies would rely mainly on their own administrative data to monitor and report their progress. In some cases, they also seek to use data from the national census and surveys conducted by the NIS and data and inputs provided by development partners and NGOs. The use of these data sources, however, has been uneven.

At the ministry and agency levels, policy implementation is equivalent to the implementation of a program-based budget process. According to the guideline of the MEF, all ministries and agencies need to implement their policy by following a ‘results framework’ to convert allocated resources (inputs) to outputs and impacts. This framework, as illustrated in the diagram below, is the same as the logical framework used in many donor programs and projects. The “results framework” is prepared and submitted for approval by the MEF to ensure its compliance with the broader national development objectives, macro-economic framework, and its internal logical flow.

Figure 2: The Government’s result framework for policy implementation



The objective of BSP and program budget is to link policy to budget. Despite the progress so far, to a large extent, budget allocation exercises in Cambodia are still incremental and not sufficiently linked to results and policy objectives.



This was found by various independent studies and confirmed in the interviews of this study.^[55] As discussed in a later section, this limitation has reduced the motivation of line ministry officials to put more effort into using data to make cases for their new programs and initiatives, knowing that such efforts would not lead to more budget and reward.

One noticeable mark of progress on policy implementation is the systematic collection of data on budget allocation and execution via the Financial Management Information System (FMIS). FMIS is a digital platform to support line ministries and agencies (including sub-national administrations) in executing and recording their budgets and to promote transparent and accountable state budget management. It was started in 2013 and currently covers all line ministries and selected SNAs.

The system has been synchronized with other management information systems such as of commercial banks, customs and excise, taxation, non-tax revenues, public debts, and public personnel.^[56] From the FMIS and these other management information systems (MIS), one can easily extract data on various topics ranging from budget allocation, budget execution, tax, non-tax collection, etc. The reports produced from these databases have been made available on MEF's websites, but most are still in PDF format and not in the more accessible and usable Excel format.^[57]

3.3.3. Policy Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)

M&E are closely related, but they are not the same. Monitoring describes the in-year and annual assessment of the implementation of activities and the achievement of short-term performance targets associated with output indicators. Evaluation refers to an in-depth assessment of long-term targets associated with outcome indicators.

Monitoring can help highlight if we are on track toward achieving the desired results, whereas evaluation can be conducted to understand 'why' we are or are not going in the right direction.^[58]

The Government recognizes the importance of M&E for both long-term and medium policies. For NSDP, it has conducted both midterm and end-term evaluations and linked them to the progress of the CSDGs.^[59]


⁵⁵ World Bank (2016) Program budgeting in Cambodia

⁵⁶ Please visit: <https://fmis.mef.gov.kh/>

⁵⁷ Please visit: <https://mef.gov.kh/documents-category/publication/>

⁵⁸ MOP (2015) Monitoring and evaluation for NSDP implementation system (MENI) orientation guideline.

⁵⁹ RGC (2020) Progress report for 2019 on the CSDGs (2016-2030).



For other reform policies such as social protection, decentralization, PFM RP, and others, annual monitoring and periodic evaluations have also been done. Monitoring has also been done on the three-year rolling BSP of line ministries and agencies as a part of the regular planning and budgeting process.^[60] The Government and development partners (such as UNICEF, UNFPA, WFP, World Bank, IMF) have also recognized limitations (see below) in the current M&E systems and have worked to improve them.

For NSDP, as assessment was made on its M&E system and a guideline has been produced on how to improve it. In 2015, a diagnostic study was done to assess the NSDP M&E system along with six criteria: 1) pre-conditions to result-based M&E, 2) the institutional framework for M&E, 3) plan and budget, 4) routine monitoring, 5) evaluation cycle and 6) M&E information systems. The overall score was 1.26 out of a potential 3. Routine monitoring scored the highest (1.88), followed by the evaluation cycle (1.5).

The institutional framework scored the lowest (0.56) and is a major hindrance to improving the M&E system. The National Working Group on M&E of the NSDP was established in 2012, but its coordination capacity, especially between MOP and other ministries, was found to be challenging.^[61] The assessment results were used to develop an orientation guideline whose main points are summarized in the box below.

Box 4: Key Points of the M&E Orientation Guideline for NSDP

Based on the assessment conducted on the M&E system for NSDP, an orientation guideline was prepared by the MOP (with technical assistance from UNICEF and UNFPA). The guideline has three main components: 1) objectives and guiding principles, 2) technical components, and 3) institutional setups.

Objectives and guiding principles: The M&E system for NSDP implementation is to provide useful and quality information for decision-making and accountability purposes on a) the implementation of major national programs and b) progress made toward NSDP and CSDG targets. Its guiding principles include, among others, value addition, focus on results, evidence-based decision-making, learning, and cost-effectiveness.

Technical components: The M&E system includes overall components and specific components for monitoring and for evaluation. The overall component has four elements: M&E policy, performance measurement framework, M&E capacity building plan, and M&E information system. The monitoring component has three elements: a monitoring handbook, a monitoring plan, and budget, and performance indicator reference sheets. The evaluation com

⁶⁰ See for instance MEF's Circular on BSP in 2021.

⁶¹ MOP (2015) Monitoring and evaluation for NSDP implementation system (MENI) orientation guideline.

ponent includes the evaluation handbook and the evaluation plan and budget.

Institutional setup: The M&E system shall put in place a permanent institutional setup with key stakeholders and key roles and responsibilities. The major actors include the Council of Minister, the Ministry of Planning, the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), the MEF, the Council for the Development of Cambodia (CDC), line ministries, development partners, qualified evaluators and consultants, and representatives of private sector and NGOs. There should also be established the M&E steering committee, M&E working group, and M&E technical secretariat.

For the three-year rolling BSP, the MEF is leading the effort to improve its M&E systems. In the BSP Guidelines (2011)^[62] and the program budget guideline (2015),^[63] a section on M&E is included. However, following the phase-by-phase approach of the PFM RP, the current focus is more on monitoring of the in-year outputs and not yet on the impact/outcome level. It is expected that the impact evaluation will be piloted and expanded in the next few years. The data used for regular monitoring of the BSP implementation comes from the monthly, quarterly, and annual reports on activities/outputs and budget execution. The activity/output reports come from line ministries and they are not publicly available. The budget execution data can be extracted from the FMIS, but it has not been made publicly available, except for the summary report.

Data is a key ingredient for good M&E, but it is not the only one. Based on existing studies and key informant interviews, this study concludes that there is already a fair amount of data produced for M&E purposes either for the long-term policies such as the NSDP or medium policy such as the BSP. However, the remaining gaps are institutional coordination for compiling and sharing the data across agencies in the government, capacity to analyze the data, and institutional mechanisms to bring key findings to policymakers.^[64]

The NIS, being the key stakeholder in coordinating the whole national statistical system, is well aware of the problems and has been working to address them. For instance, technical support from development partners has developed and put into use a digital data-sharing platform called CamStat since 2019. While useful, CamStat is however still in its early stage, with many technical problems to be addressed (please see the box below). Another example is the plan to adopt the Data User Engagement Strategy to better disseminate data and get feedback from users. The next section on data governance will discuss this in more detail.

⁶² MEF (2011) Guideline on preparing Budget Strategic Plan (BSP)

⁶³ MEF (2015) Guideline on preparing program-based budgets

⁶⁴ MOP (2015) Summary assessment of the M&E system for NSDP implementation.

Box 5: CamStat – A potential Pilot But with Many Challenges to Address


Data sharing and management is a key component in creating the link between data and the formulation and monitoring of development policies and plans. Digital technology is critical in creating such links by using management information systems (MIS). CamStat is one example of how this idea can be operationalized. It is an online platform that collects data from various ministries and makes it available online for the general public to extract those data for various uses. It can be accessed at: <http://camstat.nis.gov.kh>.

CamStat consists of twelve sectors, including Education, Agriculture, Health and Nutrition, Demographic, Economic, Environment, Governance, SDG, Tourism, Employability, Gender, and Infrastructure. From the testing conducted for this research, the data on those 12 sectors is still limited to be used for analysis. The available datasets in CamStat are found to be incomplete and thus not recommended to use. The platform itself is underdeveloped and unreliable. For instance, there are still many font and style errors. The datasets from sectors are not up to date, and are unorganized, with potentially many clerical errors.

3.4. Key Features of Cambodia's Policy Process

Having described the policy process in Cambodia, this section will highlight a number of its key features, especially those that are not stated in writing. These include the improved quality of the policy process itself, the growing influence of MEF, the challenges of cross-ministerial coordination, and the impacts of social media and youth on public policymaking and responses. These features, while not entirely unique to Cambodia, are key nuances to how policies are formulated, implemented, and evaluated. As illustrated in Sections 4 and 5, these features have also shaped how data has been produced, shared, and used in the policy process. The first feature is the positive intention of the Government to actually deliver on achieving development goals, and meeting the target of ensuring Cambodia becomes a middle-income country by 2030 and a high-income country by 2050. In comparison to the 1990s and 2000s, policy priorities need to be much more focused around strong institution building, formalizing state systems, and providing strong incentives for reform in collaboration with multiple stakeholders such as civil society, the private sector, academia, intellectuals, and development partners.

Secondly, the quality of the policy process in Cambodia is not static but has been improving over time. The improvement has been attributed partly to two key factors: the many reforms that have been implemented and the growing number



of young and educated technocrats who run the process. These two factors have been noticed throughout the Government, but most prominently within MEF. This is because MEF has become the hub of reform and because it has the ability to mobilize resources from both the national budget and development partners to support reform activities and, more importantly, to attract and incentivize younger professionals, most of whom were educated abroad.

The third prominent feature is the growing influence of MEF in policy matters. MEF is currently the single most influential ministry in Cambodia, both by design and by default. The Ministry has the mandate to lead the formulation of the Rectangular Strategy and the NSDP, while the Ministry of Planning (MOP) plays more of a coordinating role. MEF is also influential over the policy agenda of line ministries, partly because of its role in reviewing those policies and partly because of its influence in budget allocation and negotiation. Given the increasing level of trust that MEF has received from the Government, MEF has become more influential among other ministries. This report will shed more insights on this power dynamic where relevant.

The challenges of cross-ministerial coordination are the fourth feature worth noting. Formulating, implementing, and evaluating cross-sectoral policies are particularly challenging in Cambodia. These policies refer to those that cut across the mandates of more than one ministry. Some sectoral policies such as decentralization and social protection have been adopted using inter-ministerial mechanisms. However, the development of other sectoral policies such as those on logistics, energy, and water governance has been more challenging. The main reason, according to key informant interviews, is the lack of incentives among individual ministries to participate. First, sectoral policy, unlike a ministerial policy, is not a key condition for a ministry to receive its budget. Second, participating in a cross-ministerial mandate might imply ministerial competition over mandate and resource control. Third, power relations among line ministries has often led to inertia, unless one among them is clearly in a superior position.

Social media use and online youth engagement is another factor shaping the nature of the policy process in Cambodia. Rapid internet penetration is the main driving force. As of January 2020, the number of internet users in Cambodia was 9.7 million and it increased to 15.5 million by March 2021, partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic and travel restrictions.^[65] Youth are the most active online participants and social media users. Among other things, social media posts have allowed real-time public updates and feedbacks on public issues. Even more significant is the fact that social media can reach high-level government officials instantly. As such, social media has become very effective in getting attention and responses from the Government.

⁶⁵ <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/kingdoms-internet-demands-amid-COVID-19-restrictions>



4. Data Governance for Policy Purposes in Cambodia

In the digital age, data has increasingly become an essential ingredient for public policy. Building on the discussion in the previous section, this section zooms in on the question of how data is produced, shared, and used by state and non-state actors. It starts with key concepts regarding data and its role in the development and relevant policy and legal framework in Cambodia. It then focuses on the roles and challenges of both state and non-state actors in producing and using data.

4.1. Conceptual Framework and Policy Frameworks

4.1.1. Conceptual Framework

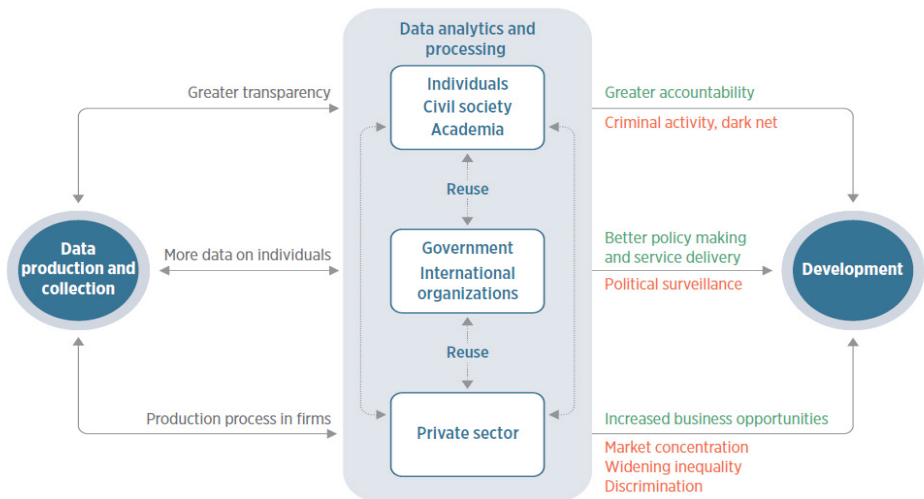
The first conceptual understanding of data is its definition, types, and life cycle. Based on the 2021 WDR, data is defined as ‘information about people, things, and systems.’ Data can be both quantitative and qualitative and can be stored on analog or digital media. Data can be classified using two dimensions.

In one dimension, based on its intent, data can be either public intent or private intent (i.e., for a commercial purpose). In the other dimension, data is classified by where it uses traditional or new collection methods. Data has a life cycle that includes create/receive, process, store, transfer/share, analyse/use, achieve/pre-serve (and, sometimes, destroy).

There are three pathways by which data can support development. According to the WDR 2021, as illustrated in the Figure below, the middle pathway is the data generated or received by Government and international organizations to support program administration, service delivery, and evidence-based policy making. The top pathway is data produced and used by civil society and academia to monitor and analyze the effect of government programs and policies and by individuals to empower and enable them to access public and commercial services tailored to their needs.

The bottom pathway is the data generated by private firms. Data can be re-used, shared, and repurposed for all three pathways. All the actors, government and non-government, are involved in the production and use of data, and to make good use of available data, they need to possess sufficient capacity for data analysis and processing.

Figure 3: Three Pathways Along which Data Can Foster Development^[66]



Data, especially the public intent data, has a direct impact on the policy process and development. This report focuses primarily on public intent data, although, where applicable, private intent data is also discussed. According to the 2021 WDR, public intent data includes six types, namely: administrative data, census, sample surveys, citizen-generated data, machine-generated data, and geospatial data. Public intent data can contribute to development in three ways: 1) improving service delivery, 2) prioritizing scarce resources, and 3) holding the government accountable and empowering individuals.

Gaps in public intent data and their root causes can be assessed using specific criteria. Those include coverage (lack of timeliness, frequency, and completeness), quality (lack of granularity, accuracy, and comparability), ease of use (lack of accessibility, understandability, and inter-operability), and safety of use (lack of impartiality, confidentiality, and appropriateness for development). The common root causes for these data gaps include deficiencies in financing, technical capacity, data governance (especially a strong national statistics office), and weaknesses in data demand.

⁶⁶ World Bank (2021) WDR 2021 – Data for better lives.

Globally, businesses have been making use of data as a production factor and/or a productivity enhancer. For social media platform companies such as Facebook and Google, data is a core production factor – on par with labor, capital, and land. For other types of businesses, data is considered as a driver of total factor productivity (TFP). In this case, data is used to improve business process, better understand customers and suppliers, develop new products, and make better decisions. In some other cases, data is considered as by-product of digital economic activities, such as call detail, purchase patterns, credit records, etc. Sectors that have benefited the most from data (especially in the form of big data) include finance, agriculture, health, education, transport and logistics, and social media marketing.

Use of data in the private firm can be helpful for development purposes, but there are also specific downsides. This can happen through four channels including 1) quality improvement in existing public services, 2) cost reduction in delivering those public services, 3) promotion of public innovations and new services, and 4) more effective intermediation and lower transaction costs. However, it can also exacerbate household inequalities where foundational skills, infrastructure, and finance are not widely available in countries. Use of data by businesses can also tilt the playing field away from poor countries, whose local enterprises may struggle to compete with large global players in part because of economies of scale and scope from data.

The expanding role of data in ubiquitous platform business models is reshaping competition, trade, and taxation in the real economy, posing important risks for developing countries. The way countries design safeguards and enablers for data will have knock-on effects for the real economy. For example, enabling data sharing among market players can play a valuable role in promoting competition. At the same time, the stringency of data safeguards will shape cross-border trading patterns for data-enabled services. Meanwhile, the intangible nature of digital value chains is posing major challenges for tax revenue mobilization.

Developing countries usually lack the institutional capacity to manage the economic policy challenges posed by the data-driven economy. These challenges call for agile competition policies and modern trade and tax administrations.

Complicating matters, policies on competition, trade, and taxation are significantly intertwined. Internationally coordinated action—on antitrust enforcement, regulation of platform firms, data standards, trade agreements, and tax policy—is critical to ensuring efficient, equitable policies for the data economy that respond to countries' needs and interests.

⁶⁷ World Bank (2021) WDR on Data for Better Lives



4.1.2. Policy Framework

Four policies in Cambodia are most relevant and significant when it comes to promoting data use in public policy. Those are: 1) the National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) (2019-2023), 2) the Cambodia Digital Economy and Society Policy Framework (2021-2035), 3) the Public Financial Management Reform Program (PFMRP), and 4) the decentralization reform. With technical assistance from development partners, these policies were initiated by the Government and designed following international practices.

The NSDS (2019-2023) is the policy on national data and statistics. Its objective is to build a national statistics system (NSS) so that it can effectively coordinate, collect, compile, analyze and disseminate high quality and objective official statistics to assist informed decision-making, debate, and discussion within the government (both national and sub-national level), business and the media, as well as the wider Cambodian and international community.

The NSDS follows the guidelines issued by the OECD'S Paris 21 Secretariat.^[68] Several development partners have supported the Cambodian statistical reform, including UN agencies and the OECD's Paris 21. NSDS also has a connection to ASEAN statistical work, which we will discuss in a later section.^[69]

A specific legal and institutional framework has been put in place to ensure an effective functioning of the NSS in Cambodia. The Statistics Law (2015) and two sub-decrees define the NSS in Cambodia.^[70] The legal framework indicates key actors in the NSS, grouped into data producers, system enablers, and data users, with development partners playing supporting roles.

Please see the diagram below. Within the Government, the main actors include the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), line ministries and agencies, and the National Bank of Cambodia. However, despite much progress, key challenges to advancing the NSS have been identified, including limited coordination among key stakeholders, limited financing, technical capacity, and use of ICT.^[71]

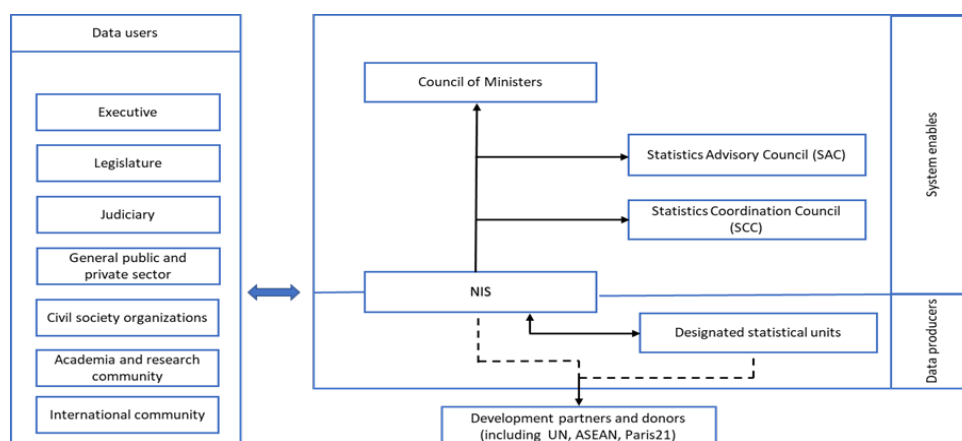
⁶⁸ Please visit: <https://paris21.org/about-paris21>

⁶⁹ RGC (2018) National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) (2019-2023)

⁷⁰ Those two sub-decrees are: 1) Sub Decree on Organization and Functioning of the National Statistical System (2007), and 2) Sub Decree on Designated Official Statistics (2010).

⁷¹ RGC (2018) National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) (2019-2023)

Figure 4: Organizational Framework for Cambodia's NSS^[72]




The Cambodia Digital Economy and Society Policy Framework (2021-2035) is another important policy. The policy is formulated in the context of the fast digitalization and the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery. Its vision is 'building a vibrant digital economy and society to accelerate new economic growth and promote social well-being based on the path of new normal.' Although mentioned throughout the policy document, the importance of data is especially emphasized in the 'digital government' section, with a separate section on 'data-driven governance.'

In the Policy, data-driven governance focuses on better data production, data sharing, and big data. It seeks to: 1) establish digital platforms for safe and effective storage and sharing of government data; 2) create services and promote the use of digital services in line ministries, private sector, and citizens; and 3) build a data-driven governance system that enhances effectiveness and transparency in public affairs. The data-driven component has ten specific policy measures, led mainly by the Ministry of Post and Communications, followed by MEF, MOP, and relevant line ministries. To implement the Policy, the National Digital Economy and Society Councils and various committees have been established, with participation from both state and non-state actors.^[73]

The PFMRP is the third policy that emphasizes the need for better use of data in the policy process. Implemented since 2004, the reform program uses a phased approach to improve 1) budget credibility, 2) financial accountability, 3) policy-budget linkages, and 4) performance accountability.

⁷² RGC (2018) National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) (2019-2023)

⁷³ RGC (2021) Cambodia digital economy and society policy framework.



Currently, the reform is at phase 3 (policy-budget linkages), which is mainly focused on improving budget planning, implementation, and M&E using the so-called program-based budgeting approach. Essentially, the program budgeting requires systematic use of data for the whole policy process, starting from formulation to M&E.^[74]

MEF is the central actor in implementing the PFMRP and other matters related to fiscal policy and management. The ministry is responsible for setting rules and regulations relating to long, medium, and short-term budget planning, budget implementation, and evaluating budget spending impact. As of this writing, based on key informant interviews, the Government has started to focus more on M&E (especially evaluation).

This new focus requires that MEF makes better use of the existing budget data extractable from the Financial Management Information System (FMIS)^[75] and set up a new department explicitly in charge of M&E.^[76]

The fourth reform program is the decentralization reform program. This policy is singled out because it relates directly to the roles of sub-national administrations which form a significant part of the public sector. According to the National Program on Sub-National Democratic Development (NP-SNDD), the reform promotes the production and use of various kinds of data to ensure a participatory and targeted planning, budget allocation, transparency, and accountability process.^[77]

In Section 5, the decentralization reform will be presented as a case study on policy process and data use.

4.2. Government as Data Producers and Users

4.2.1. Current Practices and Progress

The Government and supporting international organizations are both the biggest data producers and data users in policy process. In Cambodia, as in many other countries, the main type of public intent data comes from censuses and surveys produced mainly by NIS and administrative data produced by line ministries (mostly on an annual, but sometimes also quarterly and monthly, basis). The following table provides examples of the data currently produced, shared, and used in the national statistical system.

⁷⁴ For more information about the PFMRP, please visit: <http://www.pfm.gov.kh/index.php/km/about-pfm-kh/pfmbackground-kh>

⁷⁵ For more information about the FMIs, please visit: <https://fmis.mef.gov.kh/>

⁷⁶ Interview, 15 November 2021.

⁷⁷ RGC (2021) National Program for Sub-National Democratic Development (NP-SNDD) Phase 2.

Table 4: Examples of Data Produced and Used in the Public Sector in Cambodia^[78]

Types/titles of data products	Years, sources
Census and surveys	
Cambodia population census	2008, 2019
Cambodia socio-economic survey (CSES)	Annually since 2007
Cambodia Demographic and Health survey (CDHS)	2005, 2010, 2015 (with MOH)
Violence against children	2013 (with MOH)
Labor force survey	2019
Foreign direct investment survey	NBC
Administrative data	
Annual education statistics and indicators	MOEYS
Annual health statistics	MOH
Orphans and vulnerable children in residential care	MOSVY
Budget planning and execution data	Paper-based and FMIS
Tourism data	MOT
Other types of data	
The Commune Database	MOP, NCDD-S
ID Poor Data	MOP

There has been noticeable progress with data production and use in Cambodia's public sector in the last decade. This finding was agreed by all the key interviewed informants. The observed progress includes higher quality and regular census, survey, administrative, and budget data produced by state actors and better (although still limited) dissemination of official data by the Government.

Examples include the observed increasing amount of data posted on the website and facebook pages of NIS, MEF, line ministries, and even SNAs. There have also been initiatives to digitalize data collection and sharing, including the CamStat led by the NIS (discussed in an earlier section) and the Cambodia Data Exchange (CamDX) led by MEF (discussed in the section on 'data and digital government' below).

⁷⁸ RGC (2018) National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) (2019-2023)



The NIS is preparing a new strategy to better disseminate data and engage users.

Based on the interviews with NIS officials, the agency is finalizing the Data User Engagement Strategy. The objectives are: 1) to encourage users (both in and outside the government) to better understand data and how to access and receive national statistical data for research and M&E exercises, and 2) to get feedback from the users on how to improve data quality and access. In promoting access to data, the NIS plans to use more of digital platform such as CamStat and other traditional means of dissemination (leaflets, websites).^[79]

A younger generation of management and technocrats and more social media use in the Government are the two factors accelerating this progress. With their foreign education, the young government officials have valued evidence-based policy processes more than their predecessors. Another critical factor is how the Government has fully and willingly embraced and used social media to seek information about citizen comments and complaints on public affairs. For instance, it seems virtually all government officials regularly follow comments and complaints posted on Facebook and Telegram groups.


Improvements in the public policy process have partially motivated and facilitated more data use. As discussed earlier, Cambodia's policy process from planning to implementation and M&E has become more standardized and has improved over time. Those standard procedures and processes require that government agencies use data to justify, monitor, and evaluate their performance. Therefore, data use has become a key component in the usual bureaucratic process. However, as discussed below, the improvement has not gone far enough to actually create incentives for state officials to use data for budget allocation, promotion, or punishment.

4.2.2. Remaining Challenges

Besides the progress, key challenges remain. The main challenges relate to the effectiveness of the NSS itself. Existing assessments and interviewed experts point to four of them, including 1) limited and uneven collaboration and coordination among key stakeholders in the NSS (see section above), especially between the NIS and other agencies, 2) limited funding to the NIS and statistics units in the Government, 3) limited staff capacity within statistical units, especially the still small number of younger, more professional staff who can quickly take up new digital technology, and 4) lack of an updated framework on data quality assessment, data sharing and dissemination, and ICT related policies.^[80]

⁷⁹ Interviews with NIS official (04 January 2022).

⁸⁰ These challenges are recognized in the NSDS (2019-2023) and were also confirmed in key informant interviews.



The above structural constraints have led to persistent challenges in data sharing. Firstly, despite the clear set-up NSS institutional framework, in practice, there is limited awareness about the roles of NIS and statistical units in line ministries and agencies. Second, while a lot of data is produced, its storage and inventories are not always well disseminated.

In some instances, even officials in the same ministries are unaware of those data inventories and how to access them. This finding also explains why it has been challenging to promote data sharing between government agencies and non-state actors.

Three reasons explain the persistent challenges of data sharing and data use within the Government. The first involves more technical issues such as inconsistent data classification and limited interoperability among different management information systems (MIS) across ministries.

Secondly, the centralized, time-consuming, and paper-based characteristics of the current bureaucratic process force bureaucrats to focus mainly on process compliance rather than on using data to improve the process itself. Thirdly, while data use is required, it has not been tied to incentives. For instance, key informants at line ministries express that it is unlikely that their agencies will get more budget or any reward by proving that they have made good use of data to support their budget proposal. ^[81]

4.3. CSOs and the Private Sector as Data Producers and Users

International practices indicate the importance of civil society, academia, and citizens in data production and use in public policy matters. Making data available for these non-state actors can enable them to hold the Government accountable for policy choices. Inputs from civil society can also serve as feedbacks for the Governments to improve and adapt their policies.


CSOs and academia create data through surveys and crowdsourcing information directly from citizens. But they also rely on administrative data from the Government to improve the quantity and quality of evidence on social programs and policies. However, their access to such administrative data remains a challenge, even in countries with a well-developed statistical system. ^[82]

4.3.1. Recent Progress and Questions of Trust

A key group of non-state actors in data production and use is research institutes and think tanks. In late 2019, a diagnostic study was conducted by the Ponlok Chomnes program. It identified 30 research institutes and think tanks in Cambodia.

⁸¹ Some government officials and people outside note that, with the prevalence of Facebook use among Government officials, Facebook posts have become a key ‘performance indicators’ which can attract much more attention from their bosses.

⁸² WDR (2021), p35



Those institutions have their key characteristics, research focus, and challenges in producing research and using their findings to influence policies. Among these, two challenges are worth mentioning here: 1) access to government data and 2) access to policy-making circles.^[83]

Key informant interviews conducted for this study confirm that the two challenges still largely remain. Those researchers who have managed to build connections and trust with Government agencies have continued to enjoy access to needed data and get their voices privately heard in policy debates. On the contrary, those who have not managed have remained distant.

Two observations on trust are worth noting. Firstly, trust can be accumulated via a combination of factors. The first is through personal connection and friendship which can come from shared educational background, age group, history of working together, etc. But more importantly, it is perceived political affiliation and tendency (e.g. if a person is perceived to be pro or anti-government) that play a determinant role. Another factor is official recognition and assignment. If a researcher has a formal approval letter, for instance, s/he can have much higher chance of accessing required official data, although that stills require certain amount of personal connection to get it done quickly. Secondly, compared to the more senior generation, there seems to be more trust among the young generation of bureaucrats and young professionals in non-government sector, partly because many of them tend to share educational and professional background (e.g., same schools, same scholarships, and training programs, etc).

Besides the challenges, a few emerging trends are observed. Firstly, Cambodian researchers have played more prominent roles in research institutions and think tanks. Unlike five or ten years ago, there are currently more Cambodian researchers, especially those younger than 45 years of age, playing leading roles in virtually all research institutions. This trend is applauded by all key stakeholders involved, including Cambodian scholars themselves and policymakers in the Governments. Second, there have been more young researcher groups formed and supported by various CSOs.

Within those groups, female researchers have been particularly encouraged and support (please see the box below on the SheThinks Network).^[84] In this study, one interesting case is identified. It is a young researcher group formed under a volunteer program of the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport called the ‘Volunteer for My Community’ program (VMC). Case studies in Section 5 will have more information on this.

⁸³ The Asia Foundation (2019) The knowledge sector in Cambodia: Knowledge producers: Situation, Challenges, and Programming Suggestions

⁸⁴ Beside the initiatives under Ponlok Chomnes, there are others – those initiated on clean water, on digital, on community development, etc.

Box 7: The SheThinks Network Supported by The Asia Foundation (the Foundation)^[85]


The SheThinks Network is a women's research network initiated by The Asia Foundation's Ponlok Chomnes: Data and Dialogue for Development program. It was conceptualized in February 2021 by 20 women researchers from various research think tanks in Cambodia and anchored by the Foundation's Ponlok Chomnes team. The Network aims to address the gender disparity within the research community in Cambodia by empowering and amplifying women's voices in research and making the research space more inclusive. It further provides an opportunity for women researchers to come together to offer strong peer support. Women researchers in junior and senior roles across the research think tanks in Cambodia are brought together to support one another in a meaningful way.

The Network aims at creating an enabling research community for women researchers. The Foundation hopes to expand opportunities for women researchers to convene, engage with peers, share their research work experiences, raise their challenges, and learn and share feedback and aspirations with another. Members can access information such as scholarships, workshops, training, and other information. Members can also access technical capacity development such as short training courses, mentoring, and coaching by more experienced members. Their participation also offers an opportunity to participate in other activities supported by the Ponlok Chomnes Program, such as blog writing, participating in a series of podcasts, and engaging with external speakers.

A few other points are worth noting in the way research institutes and think-tanks produce and share research and data. First, interviewed researchers confirmed that their research topics have still been driven by donors' agendas, although they also said they mostly agree with those agendas. For instance, most donor-funded research projects in the past two years were focused on COVID-19 and its impact, which is a very relevant topic. Second, there has been more systematic sharing of research findings on websites and social media. One example of such effort is the development of the Report Dashboard by the United Nations Cambodia, which provides good access and updates on the recently published and even upcoming research products online.^[86] Another example is the regular webinars run by leading research institutes, which cover various topics and are joined by prominent scholars, mostly Cambodian. It is here argued that these simple digital initiatives can help further research works in Cambodia.

⁸⁵ <https://policypulse.org/ponlok-chomnes/shethinks-network/>

⁸⁶ Please visit: <https://un-cambodia.exploredata.report/>



Despite the progress, using quantitative data with large samples is still a constraint to many Cambodian researchers. Technically speaking, both quantitative and qualitative research and data should be valued if they are properly designed and conducted. Even so, to many Cambodian policymakers interviewed for this study, there seems to be a tendency to downplay qualitative research and any quantitative research with a small sample size. Sample size, it seems, is among the first questions policymakers ask of any research presented to them. The over-emphasis on sample size, this study argues, is an underappreciation by the Government of research work conducted by Cambodian researchers, whose works have become better over time. ^[87] In some cases, however, findings from qualitative research are also welcome by policymakers if they bring more insights from international and regional experience. This finding is based on key informant interviews and confirmed at the Foundation's workshop in November 2021. Generally, policymakers think they have fairly good ideas about local situations and problems. What they want to hear more about are potential solutions. Useful policy solutions, in their opinions, should be backed by international concepts and experiences from other countries, especially those with comparable situations to Cambodia. This is a key reason why, as suggested by policymakers, working with international experts and partnering with regional and international research institutions is important to improving local research institutions' capacity and ensuring the relevance of their research findings.

There have been some interesting initiatives aimed at collecting public data and making it available online. The one example identified in this study is Open Development Cambodia (ODC). Based on its website, ODC is an 'open data' website run based on the premise that data collected for public interest should be publicly available without restrictions. ^[88] On its website, the ODC has made available public data on various topics, ranging from COVID-19, SDGs, environment, and more recently, foreign direct investments. It has a datahub which, as it is indicated on its website, has 4,011 searchable datasets. ^[89]


4.3.2. Data Access and Data use

Better access to data is key to improving research works in Cambodia for policy purposes. Actually, as a matter of fact, data sharing is a common problem in many countries, and not just in Cambodia. This is why the idea of having data intermediaries has gained more attention in recent years (please see the box below). For the case of Cambodia, based on interview literature and key informant interviews, two observations were made. First, local research institutes need to have better access and make use of existing data produced by the Government. In the long term, this access can be improved as the coordination and data sharing within the NSS also improves.

⁸⁷ This observation is based on the author's personal experience reviewing research products over the past 15 years and confirmed by key informants.

⁸⁸ For more information, please see <https://opendevdevelopmentcambodia.net/about/background/>

⁸⁹ <https://data.opendevdevelopmentcambodia.net/en/dataset?organization=cambodia-organization>.



In the short and medium terms, however, it is expected that researchers outside the Government will have better access to Government data as the Data User Engagement Strategy led by the NIS is implemented. Therefore, it is essential that research and academic institutions get actively engaged in this implementation process.

Box 8: The Need for and Roles of Data Intermediaries


One way to enable better data use and sharing is through data intermediation. A data intermediary can help facilitate the collection, validation, and aggregation of data from data contributors and make data understandable, usable, and accessible to data users. Data intermediaries can facilitate data sharing in a trusted, more efficient manner between the Government institutions or between government and non-government actors. Having a data intermediary is a good option especially for developing countries that may have gaps in their data management frameworks or weak enforcement. ^[90]

Data intermediaries in public sector facilitate and promote data sharing between diverse actors by ensuring compliance with minimum data protection and security rules, as well as quality standards and rules to make data inter-operable. Although the use of data intermediaries is yet as common as in the private sector, much can already be learned from data intermediary models already in use in commercial and academic sphere today. Examples of those model include :^[91]

- Data stewards: Organizational leaders who hold designated data stewards' roles to manage data rights and data reuse and identify opportunities for productive cross-sectoral data collaboration,
- Data trust: A repeatable framework of agreements based on trust or contracts, allowing data rights holders to delegate control of their data to a trustee,
- Data collaborative: A data sharing relationship that can take multiple forms, including public interfaces, a trusted intermediary, data pooling, and research and analysis partnerships. In a relationship between organizations of different sectors, the data collaborative allows for one or more parties' data, insights, models or expertise to be shared, and
- Data cooperative: A network of agreements between peers with mutual interests, allowing data resources to be pooled. Members bring in data and are responsible for stewarding the data. Data is brought and removed as members join and leave.

⁹⁰ WDR (2021), p277-280

⁹¹ World Economic Forum (WEF) (2022), Advancing digital agency: The power of data intermediaries, Insight report February 2022,



Data intermediaries can be public agencies or non-profit organizations. A public entity or government agency could take the role of an intermediary, especially as it relates to data coming from public bodies. Therefore, it can act as an aggregator or gateway for such information. It can also play greater role in making the data more easily accessible, identifiable, searchable, and useable, including coordinating interoperable systems across the public sector. A non-profit intermediary, on the other hand, needs to be economically viable to exist and cover ongoing costs.

In addition to data access, the use of already available data is also critical. Interviewed government officials agree that data access is still an issue. However, they also add that a lot of data has already been made available online as of now. As an immediate concern, interviews suggest, some local researchers and CSOs might not have a good idea of those existing online data and how to use it. Examples of such data include the Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey (CSES), budget related data, economic data, SNA-administration data, etc. Therefore, in the short-run, local researchers and CSO can focus on doing a mapping and updating of those data, learn to use it, while identifying their gaps and advocating for more data sharing. This study has done a preliminary mapping of the available online data (please see the annex section), which can be further expanded and improved.


The second solution is to improve local research institutions and CSOs to better use digital platforms to collect and access more data. These range from the use of open-source apps such as Kobo Toolbox to collect and analyse data, online surveys such as SurveyMonkey or Google forms, chatbot, using of open-data sources (such as those offered by the World Bank, IMF, and others), and the use of citizen-generated data.^[92] From the interviews and observations, many of these of techniques have been used to different degrees by research institutions and civil society in Cambodia to collect data for their survey works or on their beneficiaries. However, the take-up is still at an early stage and ad-hoc. More training on these techniques, this study argues, will speed up and make the process more effective.

4.3.3. Engagement of Private Sector and Private Intent Data

Partnership with the Private Sector is Critical in Promoting the Use of Private Intent Data for Public Policy Purposes. In many countries, data generated by the private sector (including big data) has been used to help foster development and improve the lives of the poor.

Besides being a key production factor for giant platform companies such as Amazon, Google, and Facebook, private sector data has also been used to, for instance, expand market access opportunities of SMEs (e.g., online food delivery,

⁹² See for instance the information in the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data at <https://www.data4sdgs.org/>, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/partnership?p=11910>;



social media marketing), improve pay transactions and financial inclusion (e.g., e-payment, using user data to improve credit scoring), improve supply management in the health sector, and logistical systems in public transport. ^[93]

In Cambodia, the notion of harnessing private sector-generated data for policy purposes is still very new. With the rapid increase of internet use, e-commerce, e-payment, and platform business in the last five years, many private companies such as mobile phone operators, internet services providers, insurance companies, PassApp, FoodPanda, AgriBuddy, Credit Bureau Cambodia, and Mekong Big Data, must have collected, stored, and used data on their clients. The idea of using these data for public policy purposes is still new in Cambodia, although it is mentioned in key policy documents such as Cambodia's Digital Economy and Society Policy Framework (2021-2035) and the NSDS (2019-2023). There has also been limited engagement from the private sector working in this emerging area of big data, except for a few players such as the Mekong Data and DataU (please see the box below).

Box 9: Mekong Data and DataU as New Players in Data Science in Cambodia

Mekong Big Data is a Cambodia's analytics and big data service technology firm. According to its published profile, the company works with organizations from large blue chip to start-ups in industries like Banking, FinTech, Telecom, development agencies and many others to help them become more data-driven and make their data pay through various solutions around big data analytics, strategy consulting and data infrastructure. Learn more: <https://mekongbigdata.com>.

DataU is the Cambodia's skills academy in the development and delivery of transformational Digital and Professional Skills training in data science, data engineering and digital marketing for the 21st century. According to its published profile, DataU's program combines industry-aligned Data Skills with research backed and localized Soft Skills training with a focus on employment, locally and abroad. Students gain not only the hard skills to enter the workforce at a higher payrate but also the soft skills and tools to better navigate and become future leaders and change-makers. DataU Academy trains enterprise's future data leaders to fill talent needs and upskill their staff across all kinds of industries from Telecom to Banking, and Tech Startup. Learn more: <https://learn.mydatau.org>.

⁹³ WDR (2021), p35

The readiness of the national statistical system is key in harnessing private intent data. That readiness, as discussed in the WDR 2021, depends on the quality of infrastructure (both hardware and software) for storing, examining, and visualizing the data as well as the capacity of the official statisticians and data scientists. To move in that direction, one suggestion is for Cambodia to draw experiences from other ASEAN countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines and conduct specific experiments with big data to provide frequent statistics and at disaggregate level. Big data will also be a key topic in the technical working group on national statistics at the ASEAN summit chaired by Cambodia in 2022 (See Section 4.5 for more on this).^[94]

4.4. Data and Digital Government

Policy on data and the digital government is found in the Cambodia Digital Economy and Society Policy Framework (2021-2035). The Framework seeks to build a digital government and public services through better use of ICT systems and data-driven components. It has three main components: a) digital government and public services, b) keys to boosting digital performance, and c) data-driven governance. The data-driven governance component has ten specific policy measures, many of which are led by the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications. Please see the table below.

Table 5: Key Policy Measures on Data-driven Governance in the Digital Policy Framework^[95]

No.	Key policy measures on data-driven governance
1	Promote digitalization within public and private sectors to collect data at multiple levels and from multiple sources, including base data, transactional data, and stored data on blockchain infrastructure as the basis of analysis.
2	Establish a common mechanism to build a data-driven governance system and enhance the institutional capacity.
3	Support digital infrastructures for data collection and develop data-driven technologies to provide warning signals for unexpected events, including natural disasters, flood, deforestation, and migration.
4	Ensure the ability to collect and analyse data through the development of shared analytics engines
5	Strengthen the functions and capacity of data collection and use by establishing key data storage facilities in line ministries and institutions, including the National Institute of Statistics and National Digital Archives.

⁹⁴ Interviews with NIS (03 January 2022).
⁹⁵ RGC (2021) Cambodia digital economy and society policy framework.

6	Invest in infrastructures and promote the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in data-driven governance systems, especially for data use and analysis, and mechanisms for the creation of highly automated and user friendly digital services.
7	Ensure the quality of data and information by updating data at the intra-institutional and inter-institutional levels, based on joint mechanisms to build data-driven governance systems.
8	Promote research on digitalization of Khmer language to enable the identification of Khmer language in search and in data analysis with Khmer script and mixed foreign script.
9	Promote public dissemination and sharing of some data
10	Participate in implementing policies and laws which support the operations of digital government, especially the promotion of data-driven governance.

The Digital Economy and Society Policy Framework covers many policy measures, one of which is on the CamDX. In the past, the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications established a national data center that contains e-mail systems, content management systems, and websites of several ministries and institutions. However, some state institutions have their own separate data centers that not linked and used as a single institution to the fullest possible. CamDX, short for Cambodia Data Exchange, is a solution to this problem. It is an online platform for promoting interoperability and integration of information systems of state institutions and for connecting with private sector systems. Please see the box below for more information on CamDX

Box 10: Cambodia Data Exchange (CamDX)^[96]

Cambodia Data Exchange (CamDX) was set up following sub-degree No. 164 issued on August 2021.^[97] It was set up locally in the data center managed by the MEF. CamDX is an online platform to exchange multi-lateral data between public institutions (national and local) and private sectors. For instance, one can register a business with the Online Business Registration on CamDX, and the documents will be transferred to all ministries involved in the business registration. Its main goal is to build an infrastructure that allows for establishing effortless access to data in government databases (public services) without compromising the security and ownership of the data and with minimal technical changes in the existing information systems.

⁹⁶ Please visit: <https://camdx.gov.kh/>

⁹⁷ RGC (2021) Sub-Decree No. 164 on data exchange through Cambodia Data Exchange (CamDX)

To exchange the data on CamDX, the institutions need to register to be a member of the CamDX platform. Technically, participating members of CamDX can access all other systems run on CamDX, but the level of access to data is different and can be configured in Security Server.

After establishing, the first service to operate on CamDX is Online Business Registration. In the first step, Online Business Registration covers only the forefront government agencies that offer the business service registration. Those key actors are the Ministry of Commerce, the General Department of Taxation, and the Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training. Other relevant ministries will join in the next step. In this step, the Ministry of Interior allows CamDX to verify the data of Khmer National Identification with their system to improve the consistency of the personal data.


Council for the Development of Cambodia is also joining the workforce to blend the investment data with company registration data. On 1 December 2021, Phase 2 of the Registration System on Information Technology Platform was launched. This phase has four other institutions becoming members of CamDX. These institutions offer eight services, including 1) registering small and medium enterprises, 2) tour operator and travel agent licensing, 3) hotel and accommodation service tourism licensing, 4) restaurant tourism licensing, 5) license/certificate/permit to operate in the ICT sector, 6) license/certificate/permit to operate in post sector, 7) pawn business licensing, and 8) transfer-of-title business licensing.^[98]

4.5. Data Governance and Partnership at the ASEAN Level

Partnership at the ASEAN level can bring about new opportunities on data governance for Cambodia. The NSDS (2019-2023) mentions the importance of partnership at the ASEAN level in building the national statistical system. Key informants also recommend that Cambodia looks for more experience from the region, especially on data management matters, including big data. From this research, it also learns that there is so much socio-economic data made available on ASEAN Statistics Web Portal.^[99] Those datasets, if well harnessed, can be beneficial for Cambodian researchers who wish to conduct regional cross-country analysis on specific development issues.

⁹⁸ Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF), Press Release: The Official Launch of the Business Registration System on Information Technology Platform Phase II, (Phnom Penh, 1st September 2021). <https://www.facebook.com/ministry.economy.finance/photos/pcb.4231226156973490/4231213420308097/>

⁹⁹ The portal can be accessed at: <https://www.aseanstats.org/>



The NSDS gives priority to the partnership at ASEAN level on matters relating to national statistics. It acknowledges that the national statistical system needs to serve different needs – at national, international, and regional levels, including ASEAN. Currently, the Government has regularly provided to the ASEAN Statistics Division (ASEANstats) various data, including international trade and balance of payment. Involved agencies, including the NIS, have received supports from development partners to ensure quality, timeliness, and comparability of these statistics which are crucial to the monitoring and assessment of ASEAN's integration measures. ^[100]

Cambodia has joined its ASEAN counterparts in endorsing the ASEAN Community Statistical System (ACSS) Code of Practice in 2012 and is currently implementing it. Following the adoption of the ASEAN Framework of Cooperation in Statistics (AFCS) in 2010, the ASEAN Community Statistical System (ACSS) was established in 2011.

It consists of national statistical system of ASEAN member states, and the relevant sectoral bodies under the ASEAN Community Council. As stated in its Strategic Plan (2016-2025), the vision of ACSS is to provide the framework for effective facilitation, coordination, production, harmonization, dissemination, and communication of ASEAN Statistics. It also charts the mechanisms in ensuring sustainable development in the dissemination of statistical information, delivery of statistical information needs, and statistical capacity building. ^[101]

ASEAN Statistics Division (ASEANstats) is in charge of ASEAN statistical and data work. It is one of the divisions under the ASEAN Economic Community Department of the ASEAN Secretariat to provide statistical services to the ASEAN Secretariat, ASEAN bodies, and ASEAN stakeholders. ASEANstats seeks to strengthen the implementation of the ACSS and adopts the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.

ASEANstats aims to become an authoritative source of relevant, comparable, and timely ASEAN statistics to facilitate knowledge building in a strong, confident and respected ASEAN Community. The table below summarizes its functions, main products and services, coordination mechanisms, and working groups.

¹⁰⁰ MOP (2019) NSDS (2019-2023)

¹⁰¹ <https://asean.org/our-communities/economic-community/monitoring-regional-economic-integration/asean-community-statistical-system/>

Table 6: Key information about the ASEANstats^[102]

Key information	Description
Functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Development of regional indicators, data frameworks and systems for monitoring ASEAN Community goals and initiatives. – Compilation, consolidation, dissemination and communication of statistical information on the ASEAN region and its Member States. – Provision of statistical services to the ASEAN Secretariat, ASEAN bodies and ASEAN stakeholders. – Harmonization of ASEAN statistics – standardization of concepts, definitions, classifications, and approaches. – Implementation, coordination and facilitation of regional statistical programs and activities including those of the working groups and task forces within the ASEAN Framework of Cooperation in Statistics, with guidance from the ASEAN Community Statistical System (ACSS) Committee; and – Implementation of policies and facilitation of partnerships between the ACSS Committee, ASEAN bodies, and international/regional statistical communities.
Main products/ services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Statistical publications – Online databases – Data request
Coordination mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ASEAN Community Statistical System (ACSS) Committee – ACSS Sub-Committee on Planning and Coordination (ACSS-SCPC) – ASEAN Integration Monitoring Directorate (AIMD)

¹⁰² <https://www.aseanstats.org/about-aseanstats/>

Working groups

- Working Group on International Merchandise Trade Statistics (WGIMTS)
- Working Group on International Investment Statistics (WGIIS)
- Working Group on Statistics of International Trade in Services (WGSITS)
- Working Group on Data Sharing, Analysis, Dissemination, and Communication of ASEAN Statistics (WGDSA)
- Working Group on Social Development Goals Indicators (WGSDGI)
- Working Group on System on National Account (WGSNA)

ASEAN also has initiatives that aim more at the private sector. From the research, two examples are identified. The first one is the ASEAN GI Database which is a common online geographical indications platform that allows interested people to explore registered geographical indications landscape in the ASEAN region in a user-friendly way.^[103] Currently, however, there is not much data registered for Cambodia.^[104]

Another data-related initiative aimed at the private sector is the ASEAN Framework on Digital Data Governance, adopted in 2018. The framework makes an explicit link between data governance, the digital economy, and small businesses. Due to the growing interactions between data, connected things, and people, trust in data has become the pre-condition for fully realizing digital transformation gains. SMEs are treading a fine line between balancing digital initiatives and concurrently managing data protection and customer privacy safeguards to ensure that these do not impede innovation. Therefore, there is a need to focus on digital data governance as it is critical to boosting economic integration and technology adoption across all sectors in the member states.^[105]

The ASEAN Framework on Digital Data Governance sets out specific strategies and initiatives. The strategic priorities include 1) data life cycle and ecosystem, 2) cross-border data flows, 3) digitalization and emerging technologies, and 4) legal and regulatory framework. The four priorities are supported by four initiatives, including 1) ASEAN data classification framework, 2) ASEAN cross-border data flow mechanisms, 3) ASEAN digital innovation forum, and 4) ASEAN data protection and private forum. The diagram below summarizes the key points.

¹⁰³ Please visit: <http://www.asean-gidatabase.org/gidatabase/>

¹⁰⁴ As of December 2021, there are only five registered GI from Cambodia, including that on Kampot pepper, Kampong Speu palm sugar, Scotch whisky, Koh Trung pomelo, and Mundukiri wild honey. Please visit: <http://www.asean-gidatabase.org/gidatabase/gi-search-2>

¹⁰⁵ ADGSOM (2021) ASEAN data management framework: Data governance and protection throughout the data lifecycle.

Figure 5: Priorities and Initiatives - ASEAN Framework on Digital Data Governance


Strategic Priorities			
Data Life Cycle & Ecosystem Outcomes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data governance throughout the data lifecycle (e.g., collection, use, access, storage) Adequate protection for different types of data Initiative ASEAN Data Classification Framework	Cross Border Data Flows Outcomes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Business certainty on cross border data flows No unnecessary restrictions on data flows Initiative ASEAN Cross Border Data Flows Mechanism	Digitalization and Emerging Technologies Outcomes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data capacity (infrastructure and skills) development Leveraging new technologies Initiative ASEAN Digital Innovation Forum	Legal and Regulatory Outcomes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Harmonized legal and regulatory landscapes in ASEAN (including personal data protection) Development and adoption of best practices Initiative ASEAN Data Protection and Privacy Forum

Big data and engagement of the private sector is the main topic pertaining to statistics at the 2022 ASEAN summit. According to the NIS official actively engaged in the event preparation, ASEAN member states will discuss how each country and the region can accelerate the adoption of big data to improve national statistical system. The broad idea is that each country will propose its own ideas reflecting its needs and level of development. Some of the ideas will be piloted, the lessons from which will be shared among the members. A critical task is to systematically engage private sectors who has much progress and accumulated rich experiences on big data. ^[106]

5. Four Cases on Data Use and the Policy Process

To further illustrate the topic of the policy process and data use in Cambodia, this study presents four specific case studies. These include 1) social protection during and after COVID-19 responses, 2) decentralization reform, 3) support to SMEs in the tourism sector, and 4) youth development and engagement. The main idea is to show that, while sharing certain general process and features, the policy process and data use in Cambodia varies by sector and issue. These cases are selected partly because they can help illustrate these variations and partly because they all are important areas in Cambodia’s recovery plan.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with NIS official (04 January 2022).



A few key messages are expected to come through in the discussion of these cases, including:

- The quality of the policy process and data use in Cambodia differ from one sector/issue to another depending on a number of key factors, including level of political interest, required inter-ministerial coordination, quality of management and technocrats in the leading agencies, and quality of M&E framework of the sector/issue.
- Despite the variation, one common pattern is that there has been a moderate amount of data produced, but the challenges are data sharing and data use. These challenges, however, are expected to be gradually addressed if the Government implements the various plans that they already have in store and if there is room for contribution from non-state actors.
- In each case, there is a substantial amount of knowledge and insights that Cambodia can learn from the ASEAN level. Therefore, a section on 'Relevance of the ASEAN' is included in each case.

5.1. Case 1: Social Protection During COVID-19 Responses

The first case is on data production and use in social protection in Cambodia. The case first shows why the Government has made a strong commitment to promoting social protection, especially in the last five years and during the COVID-19 period. The case further elaborates that such political commitment is one key essential factor allowing for effective data use and data sharing in the policy process, despite some remaining coordination and technical challenges.


5.1.1. Social Protection and Political Commitment

Social protection as a policy is defined differently and with different scopes. For Cambodia, social protection is defined as a system that consists of policies, programs, activities and the legal and institutional framework that are established to provide protection and to promote the capacity of Cambodian citizens to effectively deal with economic risks and other vulnerabilities resulting from the changes of living and working conditions. Social protection in Cambodia is divided into social assistance and social insurance.^[107] This definition is broadly in line with international practices.^[108]

The main policy on social protection in Cambodia is the National Social Protection Policy Framework (2016-2025). The document lays out the vision, objectives, outputs, activities, as well as other cross-cutting issues of the social protection system. It also includes a matrix indicating specific actions to be taken by particular agencies. The policy was developed in consultation and with inputs from development partners and NGOs. The key gaps of the document, however, are information on financing needs and a comprehensive M&E framework.

¹⁰⁷ RGC (2016) NSPPF (2016-2025)

¹⁰⁸ For more information, please see Schuring, E and Loewe, M (2021) Handbook on social protection systems.



Social protection is one complicated and budget-intensive policy to which the Government has committed. This level of commitment (especially when involving significant government spending) is uncommon for Cambodia. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government's social assistance programs covered less than 2% of the poorest quintile of the population.^[109] In 2015, the share of the Government's budget allocated to these programs was about 0.9%, which was significantly lower than the global average.^[110] When the COVID-19 hit, however, the Government took swift actions to support those vulnerable and affected. According to the MEF, as of August 2021, more than USD \$410 million has been disbursed to 2.6 million people.^[111] The government is committed to social protection, this report argues, because it is in line with the official policy and, more importantly, in line with the Government's Rectangular Strategy.

5.1.2. Data Use and Further Reforms

Designing and implementing social protection programs is a very data-intensive process, requiring a lot of coordination. By definition, social protection is a cross-sectoral policy involving different stakeholders who provide inputs and data when designing social protection instruments. Moreover, the need for data gets more expansive during the implementation stage. These include data on outreach and registration, needs and condition, eligibility and enrolment, payment, service delivery, etc. Data management is therefore considered an integral part of a country's social protection system.^[112]

Data production, use, and sharing in social protection is a good practice. To identify target beneficiaries, various datasets have been established and improved by the Government, with technical and financial assistance from development partners. The main database is the identification of poor households, commonly known as the ID Poor. Since 2008, the ID Poor program has been used by the Government, development partners, and NGOs to identify poor and extremely poor households throughout the country, starting with the rural population and extending it to urban settings since 2018. The ID Poor program is also among the few Government databases made available on its website, relatively updated, and easy to use.^[113]

Despite some limitations, the ID Poor program has been considered relatively efficient. In developing countries, all poverty identification systems are subject to performance issues, especially given the usually high level of informality.^[114]

¹⁰⁹ World Bank Group. 2017. Cambodia: Sustaining Strong Growth for the Benefit of All. Washington, DC.

¹¹⁰ UNDP (2020) Meeting the costs and maximizing the impact of social protection in Cambodia.

¹¹¹ <https://www.amro-asia.org/lifting-cambodia-out-of-the-COVID-19-rut-with-support-from-the-cash-transfer-program/>

¹¹² Schuring, E and Loewe, M (2021) Handbook on social protection systems.

¹¹³ For more information, please visit <https://mop.idpoor.gov.kh/>

¹¹⁴ Brown, C et al (2018) A poor means test? Econometric targeting in Africa, Journal of Development Economics, Elsevier, vol. 134(C), p. 109-124.

According to a review undertaken by the OECD in 2017, the ID poor faced several challenges commonly found in other developing countries, including inclusion and exclusion errors. However, the system was considered relatively efficient.^[115] From the key informant interviews conducted for this study, the Ministry of Planning, together with its development partners, has been working to address the challenges by improving the questionnaires, considering including new vulnerable groups (e.g., people with disabilities, people living with HIV), and improving data dissemination.^[116]

Another substantial progress concerning data use in social protection is the adoption of a more comprehensive M&E framework. As mentioned earlier, the Government policy process tends to fall short at the M&E stage. Against this background, the fact that the Social Protection council adopted the M&E framework in 2020 is a noticeable achievement. Please see the table below. The remaining challenges, however, are to coordinate and use the data from the different agencies.


Table 7: Institutions and Data Sources in Social Protection M&E Framework^[117]

#	Institutions	Data Sources
1	Ministry of Health (MoH)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Service statistics – Registration database – Population estimation – Health equity funds – Invoice records – Payment records
2	Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation (MoSVY)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Expenditure reports – Registration database – Service statistics – Invoice records – Payment records
3	MoP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ID Poor registration system – CSES


¹¹⁵ OECD (2017) Social protection system review of Cambodia, OECD Development Pathways, OECD Publishing, Paris.

¹¹⁶ MOP interviews,

¹¹⁷ NSPC (2021) M&E framework for social protection in Cambodia



4	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Expenditure reports – MoEYS reporting – Registration database – Master list of public schools – Population estimation – Service statistics – Invoice records – Payment records
5	MEF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Planned budget worksheets – Expenditure reports
6	National Social Security Fund	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Expenditure reports – Financial reports – Actuarial reports – Registration database – Population estimation – Service statistics – Invoice records – Payment records – Planned budget
7	National Committee for Disaster Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Expenditure reports – Population estimation – Service statistics – Invoice records – Payment records
8	National Institute of Public Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – CSES – Service statistics – Modelling results
9	General Secretariat of the National Social Protection Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Modelling results – Audit tracking system – Field visit report – M&E dashboard – Live Rice Index



The National Social Protection Council (NSPC) recognizes the need to improve data management. One of its planned reform priorities is to develop an integrated ICT-based service delivery system supporting the various social protection programs. Key development partners such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) already have plans to support this area. A technical assistance project is expected to develop an integrated digital platform to offer end-to-end social protection programs. The efforts will cover key data aspects of social protection, including registration, identification, enrollment of beneficiaries, delivery of social services, and monitoring. ^[118]

5.1.3. Relevance of ASEAN

In 2018, the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection, together with its regional framework and action plan was adopted. Its vision is to uplift the life of ASEAN people by 2025, with the goal to enhance the well-being, welfare, and livelihood of the peoples throughout their life cycle. It has many activities, one of which is on ‘collaboratively accelerate the progress towards Universal Health Coverage (UHC) in all ASEAN member states by strengthening capacity to assess and manage health systems to support UHC through sharing of experiences, information and experts.’ ^[119]

5.2. Case 2: Decentralization Reform

Decentralization is another case of a cross-sectoral reform. Similar to social protection, decentralization is critical for local service delivery. However, in practice, it has faced a lot of cross-ministerial coordination. The case is used to illustrate how these factors have contributed to the ineffective use and sharing of existing data. That said, data sharing and use are likely to improve in the future because of better coordination between MOI and MEF, more use of digital management information systems (MIS), and more emphasis on M&E at the sub-national level.

5.2.1. Decentralization and Coordination Challenges

Cambodia’s record with decentralization has been gradual and uneven at times. It first started the reform in 2002, with the election of the commune/Sangkat council. In 2008, the reform was introduced to the district, municipal, and khan (DMK) level and provincial and Capital level. All the details asides, two points are relevant here. First, the decentralization reform was introduced against the country’s long history of centralization, which existed since its independence in 1953. ^[120] Second, as far as cross-ministerial coordination is concerned, the decentralization at the commune/Sangkat level introduced in 2002 was simpler compared to the reform at DMK level because it did not involve redistributing authority and resources from central government to the sub-national administrations. ^[121]

¹¹⁸ ADB (2020) Kingdom of Cambodia: Supporting digital Cambodia for inclusive development project.

¹¹⁹ ASEAN (2018) ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection

¹²⁰ ADB (2011) D&D in Cambodia.

¹²¹ NCDD (2010) NP-SNDD



Policy-wise, the D&D reforms in Cambodia have been guided by the National Program on Sub-National Democratic Development (NP-SNDD). The first NP-SNDD covered the period from 2010 to 2020. It has the following components: 1) Reform management, 2) SNA functions and structures, 3) Human resource management and development, 4) Fiscal decentralization and SNA planning and budgeting, and 5) Public service delivery and local development.

The Government is just adopted the NP-SNDD Phase II for the period from 2021 to 2030. It covers the same five components and includes key cross-cutting areas such as gender equality, social equity, and inclusiveness, climate change and disaster management, and E-governance.

Despite a high-level coordination mechanism, coordination among ministries has been particularly challenging for the reform. The currently high-level coordination is the National Committee for Democratic Development (NCDD), established in 2008, chaired by the Ministry of Interior (MOI), and the MEF is one of the deputy chairs. One of the tasks of the NCDD is to push for more transfer of functions and budget to the DMK administration, but since 2008, the progress has been slow, especially for budget transfer. In 2020, the DMK budget accounted for only 0.7% of the total national budget. ^[122]

Coordination between reforms (decentralization and PFMRP) and among key ministries has been very challenging. The decentralization reform, although a government-wide reform, is often seen as led by the Ministry of Interior, while the public financial management reform program (PFMRP) is led by MEF. Studies suggest that the two reforms have not been well-coordinated, with MEF not fully onboard with the decentralization in the last decade. Line ministries have also been slow in transferring functions to sub-national administrations. ^[123] From 2019, however, the situation is expected to change for the better, as MEF had just adopted the Budget System Reform Strategy to transfer more budgetary power to sub-national administrations. ^[124]

5.2.2. Challenges in Data Use in Decentralization


Data collection and management is one essential tool in decentralization in Cambodia. As of 2020, NCDD has developed and run at least 15 different databases, divided into three groups: 1) those regularly used by the NCDD Secretariate (NCDD-S), 2) those for sub-national administrations to regularly update, and 3) those periodically updated. Please see the Annex section for the list of the 15 databases. Among the databases, at least eight are supposed to be made publicly available, including the Commune Database. ^[125]

¹²² WB (2021) Intergovernmental transfer in Cambodia

¹²³ WB (2021) Intergovernmental transfer in Cambodia

¹²⁴ MEF (2019) SNA-BSRS (2019-2025)

¹²⁵ Please see db.ncdd.gov.kh



The Commune Database (usually referred to as CDB) is one good example of a useful database not well shared and used. Starting in 2002 and administered by the Ministry of Planning, the CDB initially had only 17 questions, but it got rapidly expanded since then. As of 2016, it had about 1,200 indicators, divided into village level (29 themes/topics), commune/Sangkat level (9 themes/topics), and DMK level (4 themes/topics).

The CDB is updated annually, with the village, commune, and DMK conducting the data collection. Updating the CDB is undoubtedly a time-consuming exercise, but the sub-national administrations received virtually no additional incentive for such tasks.

The data from the CDB has been used for various policy purposes. These include the development of the five-year plans and three-year rolling investment programs of all the sub-national administrations, the development of the so-called SNA-scorecards.^[126] The CDB data has also been used to calculate the poverty rate by communes which are then used to calculate the Commune/Sangkat Fund (CS-F).^[127] Back in 2012, the dataset was also used to prepare a report on Cambodia Millennium Development Goals (CMDGs) at sub-national by Capital, provinces, and DMK.^[128]


Beyond the above uses, the CDB has not been widely shared and used. Based on the findings from this research, the dataset and the various products derived from it have not been widely shared, except for SNAs so that they can prepare their annual stiaution report and scorecards. The latest CDB available on the NCDD-S website is from 2010. The process of requesting the CDB datasets from the Ministry of Planning has been challenging. The CDB datasets have not been used widely either. Except for the above uses, it has not been known by sectoral line ministries and line departments, although many of the variables in the CDB also cover those sectoral issues. Because the database is not available outside the Government, it has neither been widely used by development partners nor NGOs.

Over time, the CDB has been viewed with increasing skepticism regarding its reliability and quality. To a large extent, CDB is associated with the decentralization reform itself.

¹²⁶ The scorecard present annually updated situation of each SNA (down to commune/sangkat level) on nine key development indicators including economic, social, environment, and gender ones

¹²⁷ CSF is an annual national transfer from the national Government to all CS throughout the country.

¹²⁸ MOP (2012) Scorecard of the implementation of Cambodia Millennium Development Goals (CMDG) at sub-national levels by Capital, Provinces, Municipalities, District, Khans in Year 2012 (Based on the Commune Database (CDB) in December 2011 Selected and Presented by Maps and Graphics)



As mentioned earlier, as the support from the MEF and various line ministries has been low, this has led to the low acceptability of the database itself. In addition, as its access has become chronically challenging, development partners have withdrawn their supports, creating more challenges to the data collection and analysis. The situation has created a circle of poor access-poor quality-poor trust in the dataset.

Despite the challenges, CDB is still the only large scale, annually updated dataset about local development in Cambodia. It contains useful variables about population, land areas, household situation, and key sectors.

Interviewees from MOP and NCDD-S indicate that, while the CDB has some limitations, it should be further improved and considered whether it can also be transformed into a citizen-generated data source. Another potential use of the CDB is for measuring the localization of the Cambodian Sustainable Development Goals (CSDGs).^[129] Three emerging reform plans are expected to improve the sharing and use of the existing data under the decentralization reform, including the CDB. Firstly, from the document reviews and interviews, the coordination between the NCDD-S/MOI and the MEF, especially the General Department of Sub-National Finance (GDSNAF), has generally improved since 2019 with the adoption of the SNA-Budget System Reform Strategy (BSRS).^[130] The strategy represents a joint effort from the MEF in pushing the decentralization in the same direction as intended in the National Program for Sub-National Democratic Development reform agenda.

The second is more emphasis on M&E concerning SNA budgeting. Again, this trend has also been pushed by MEF under the SNA-BSRS (2019-2025). As argued throughout this paper, attention on data tends to increase with attention on M&E. According to the interview with MEF officials, a new guideline on M&E is being drafted and finalized for SNAs, starting from the Capital and provincial level first. At the same time, the MEF, with technical support from the World Bank, has been conducting a public expenditure review (PER) on SNAs. PER is a form of evaluation on the operational and allocative efficiency by SNAs.^[131]

The third is the overall improvement of digitalization and the use of management information systems (MIS) for information sharing and reporting by SNAs. The new National Program for Decentralization Reform (2021-2030) has e-government as one key area of focus. To make e-government work, data governance will be given more attention including the development and functioning of a nation-wide MIS that SNAs and national level agencies can enter and share data in a timely and consistent manner.^[132]

¹²⁹ MOP interviews (date), NCDD-S interviews (Date)

¹³⁰ MEF (2019) SNA-BSRS

¹³¹ MEF interviews (date), WB interviews (Date)

¹³² NCDD (2021) National Program on Sub-National Democratic Development (NP-SNDD) for 2021-

5.2.3. Relevance of ASEAN

Unlike social protection (discussed above) or SME development and youth development (discussed below), there is no ASEAN regional policy framework on decentralization. Based on a recent study by the World Bank, the ASEAN countries are significantly different when it comes to decentralization and the roles of local government.^[133] However, from the interviews conducted for this study,^[134] there is still an interest in comparing Cambodia's case with other ASEAN countries, especially Thailand, Vietnam, and a few others such as Malaysia and Indonesia.

5.3. Case 3: Support for Tourism Sector MSME During COVID-19 Pandemic

Despite its importance to the economy, data use in the policy process relating to MSMEs in the tourism sector has been under-developed. This case discusses some of the existing gaps and illustrates how they relate to specific policy and institutional constraints concerning the registration and support for MSMEs themselves. The prevalence of informality also makes it hard to capture the full scale of the MSMEs, which in turn makes it hard for the Government to identify and support vulnerable MSMEs during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. The Government is aware of these issues and has taken concrete steps to address them. There are also valuable insights and programs that the Government can learn from the ASEAN level.

5.3.1. MSMEs in the tourism sector and Government support during COVID-19

Statistics on MSMEs in Cambodia are outdated and have issues with definition. They are defined based on the number of employees and asset values. Before 2020, the same thresholds are used for all types of MSMEs. After 2020, however, different thresholds are used for different sectors (Please see the table below). The latest national data available on MSMEs from NIS is from 2014. It shows there were 512,870 of MSMEs in Cambodia (or about 99.8% of the total number of enterprises). The formality of MSMEs in Cambodia is determined by their registration status. In 2018, the total number of registered MSMEs was reported at around 156,000. The government seeks to ensure that at least 80% of MSMEs are registered by 2025.^[135] However, the large informal sector and unclear requirements on registration raise the question about what the validity of 80% as the official number.

¹³³ World Bank (2020) Deepening decentralization within centrally led states: The direction of local governance reforms in Southeast Asia.

¹³⁴ Interview with MEF official (GDSNAF) (15 November 2021)

¹³⁵ RGC (2015) "Cambodia Industrial Development Policy 2015 – 2025"

Table 8: MSME Definition in Cambodia

Definition until 2019				
	Item	Micro	Small	Medium
Assets		\$50,000 and below	\$50,000 - \$250,000	\$250,000 - \$500,000
Number of employees		Fewer than 10	10-50	51-100

Source: ADB Asia SME Monitor 2020 database. Data from Small and Medium Enterprise Development Framework of 2005.

Definition after 2020				
Sector	Item	Micro	Small	Medium
Manufacturing	FTE Workforce Count	1-2	3-49	50-499
	Assets (excluding land)	\$50,000 and below	\$50,000 - \$500,000	\$500,000 - \$1,000,000
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	FTE Workforce Count	1-2	3-49	50-199
	Assets	\$50,000 and below	\$50,000 - \$500,000	\$500,000 - \$1,000,000
Wholesale and Retail Trade	FTE Workforce Count	1-2	3-49	50-199
	Assets (excluding land and buildings)	\$50,000 and below	\$50,000 - \$500,000	\$500,000 - \$1,000,000
Other Services	FTE Workforce Count	1-4	5-49	50-99
	Assets (excluding land)	\$50,000 and below	\$50,000 - \$500,000	\$500,000 - \$1,000,000
Other Activities	FTE Workforce Count	1-9	10-49	50-199
	Assets	\$50,000 and below	\$50,000 - \$500,000	\$500,000 - \$1,000,000

FTE = full-time equivalent, MSME = micro, small, and medium-sized enterprise.

Notes: FTE refers to the ratio of the total number of paid hours during a period (part-time, full-time, contracted) by the number of working hours in that same period. The MSME definition uses US dollar amounts for asset thresholds.


Source: ADB Asia SME Monitor 2020 database. Data from Small and Medium Enterprise Development Policy and Five-Year Implementation Plan 2020-2024. Forthcoming.

Many of the registered businesses in the tourism sector in Cambodia are concentrated in Phnom Penh, followed by Siem Reap. There are many types of those businesses, as listed below. With the exception of tour-guide (which are more self-employed), they are concentrated in Phnom Penh. For instance, the Capital accounts for more than 50% of registered tour agents, 33% of karaoke, 67% of nightclubs, 33% of hotels, and 33% of massage parlors. The second-ranking province is Siem Reap.^[136] However, these official data should be taken as indicative, given that many businesses who are supposed to be registered might have failed to comply.

Cambodia's tourism sector has been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. The sector had experienced impressive growth in the last decade, with an average annual increase of international tourist arrivals of 12%. It had at the time created 16,221 registered tourism establishments and generated approximately 630,000 tourism direct jobs. However, in 2020, because of the COVID-19, the number of international tourist arrivals dropped by 80% compared to 2019. As a result, the number of local tourists fell to 7.23 million, a drop of 36.1% compared to 2019. It is expected that the sector will continue to experience minus growth in 2021 but hope to jump back from 2022 onward.^[137]

¹³⁶ MOT (2020) Statistics on the number and types of tourism sector business in 2019

¹³⁷ MOT (2021) Key statistics of tourism sector and prediction



The tourism sector is a priority in the Government's economic recovery plan. In 2021, the Ministry of Tourism (MoT) prepared the Roadmap for Tourism Sector Recovery During and Post COVID-19 period (2021-2025) to bring the number of tourists back to the pre-COVID-19 period (i.e., roughly 7 million for international tourists and 11 million for internal tourists). In addition, since February 2020, the Government has issued eight rounds of these support measures, the last of which ended in June 2021. Each round slightly varies in terms of the types of support. Still, overall, they include exemption of tax, license fee, audit, and social security contribution for registered business in the tourism sector and provision of cash support and up-skill training to laid-off workers in the tourism sector.^[138]

Many registered MSMEs in the tourism sector were aware of the Government support, but very few actually received it. Based on the surveys conducted by The Asia Foundation, as of April 2021, about 70% of the businesses were aware of the programs. However, only about 45% of the registered business reported receiving the tax and exemption, while only about 10% said they received the technical training program, laid-off employees' cash support, and/or bank/MFIs debt restructuring. Among the main reasons for not using the programs, as indicated by the respondents, include limited information about the programs, their lack of understanding of how to access them (and whether they are eligible), and their perception that the current application procedure is confusing and too complicated.^[139]

5.3.2. Policy and Data Use in Supporting of MSMEs in the Tourism Sector


Policy formulation and data use in support of MSMEs in Cambodia are still at an early stage of development. In terms of policy, according to the 2018 ASEAN SME Policy Index, Cambodia received a score of 2.55 for institutional framework and policy (compared to the median score of 4.20) and a score of 2.31 for legislation, regulation, and tax (compared to 3.43 of median score). In terms of data, the report found that there was very little monitoring and evaluation on the 2005 SME Development Framework, while the SME data has not been collected regularly either.^[140]

As with the MSMEs in the tourism sector, the data challenge is even more fundamental than just collecting more data and using it. It starts with the fact that there is no consistent definition of MSMEs being used by different ministries and agencies, and there is no consistent legal requirement regarding MSME registration.

¹³⁸ The Asia Foundation (2021) Revisiting the Pandemic: Rapid survey on the impact of COVID-19 on MSMEs in the tourism sector and households in Cambodia

¹³⁹ The Asia Foundation (2021) Revisiting the Pandemic: Rapid survey on the impact of COVID-19 on MSMEs in the tourism sector and households in Cambodia

¹⁴⁰ OECD, ERIA, and ASEAN (2018) ASEAN SME Policy Index



The 2018 ASEAN SME Policy Index found that more than 75 licenses may apply to SMEs in Cambodia, and they are issued by many ministries.^[141] This situation probably also applies to the case of SMEs in the tourism sector.

According to the Tourism Law, MSMEs in the tourism sector need to register with the Ministry of Tourism (MOT). This requirement is in addition to the required registration with other ministries such as Ministry of Commerce and the General Department of Taxation. Despite the legal provisions in the tourism law, in practice, what is still unclear is what size of a business needs to be registered. Based on the 1995 Law on Commercial Rules and Register (Article 3), there is mentioning of a family business that is not required to be registered. However, according to Sub-decree #18 (2017), when the function to register a micro and small business in the tourism sector were delegated to the One Window Service Unit (OWSU) at the Capital and provincial level and the One Window Service Office (OWSO) at the district, municipal and Khan (DMK) level, it seems that all sizes of businesses such as guesthouses, restaurants, massage parlors, and tourist transports need to apply for a license.^[142]

To promote business registration, both the MOT and the OWSU and OWSO level have adopted and sought to expand online business registration. The website was launched by the Ministry of Tourism in April 2015.^[143] The purpose of this website is for businesses and tour-guide related to tourism to register their license online and reduce operator request time to speed up the application process. Also, it is to prevent people from gathering to reduce the COVID-19 spread. At OWSU and OWSO levels, the Government is pushing the Service Deliver Management Information System (SDMIS) to allow for online inquiries, service progress tracking, e-payment, and online application.

Another initiative by the Government is the use of a business registration website which seeks to make business registration more efficient.^[144] Following the Government's policy in promoting Industry 4.0, the process will take only eight days for business registration to complete. This initiative, it is said, will help attract new business in and to Cambodia and also to help formalize the large informal sector of the economy.

5.3.3 Relevance of ASEAN

Comparative insights can be learned from the ASEAN level concerning SMEs in the tourism sector. Those insights can be found in regional research studies such as the SME Policy Index conducted in 2018. The study looks at the policy land

¹⁴¹ OECD, ERIA, and ASEAN (2018) ASEAN SME Policy Index

¹⁴² The Asia Foundation (2021) Revisiting the Pandemic: Rapid survey on the impact of COVID-19 on MSMEs in the tourism sector and households in Cambodia

¹⁴³ Please visit: www.cambodiatourismindustry.org

¹⁴⁴ Please visit: <https://www.registrationservices.gov.kh/en/home>

scape of SME development across the ASEAN region, identifying potential gaps and offering recommendations going forward. The study is useful for research on SMEs in Cambodia for the following reasons.

First, one can learn from its methodology, which builds on the OECD’s SME Policy Index methodology and integrates the goals of the ASEAN Strategic Action Plan for SME Development (SAP SMEF) 2016-2025. Second, the assessment uses the same eight criteria (25 sub-criteria) to assess SME policy and situation in ASEAN member state, giving each a score for each country and a median score for the whole region. This comparative perspective is particularly insightful for policymakers in each country. Third, the study is expected to be repeated over a period of time, and thus, offers not only cross-country but also cross-time comparative data.


Table 9: SME Policy Index 2018 Scores for Cambodia as Compared to the ASEAN Region

No.	Dimensions	Cambodia score	ASEAN median score
1	Productivity, technology, and innovation	2.62	3.78
2	Environmental policies and SMEs	1.88	3.45
3	Access to finance	2.89	4.15
4	Access to market and internationalization	2.69	4.55
5	Institutional framework	2.55	4.20
6	Legislation, regulation, and tax	2.31	3.43
7	Entrepreneurial education and skills	2.54	4.27
8	Social enterprises and inclusive entrepreneurship	2.35	2.77

In the tourism sector, ASEAN also offers specific initiatives and programs especially in the context of the region’s economic recovery. According to the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF), SMEs are relevant in all five strategies. However, under Strategy 3 (Maximizing the potential of the intra-ASEAN market and broader economic integration), one key priority is devoted to the tourism sector – Key priority “3g” (Accelerating sectoral recovery (tourism, MSMEs) and safeguarding employment in affected sectors). In this priority, specific initiatives and programs are offered. ^[145]

A few other development institutions also keep updated SME data on the ASEAN region, including Cambodia. One example is the Asian Development Bank (ADB)’s

¹⁴⁵ To include a table later on.



Data Library which also includes datasets on Asia SME Monitor, which is regularly updated and made available in Ms Excel format. The database, at least for the case of Cambodia, is comprehensive and refers to the latest data made available from key ministries and agencies from the Cambodia Government such as NIS, the National Bank of Cambodia, Cambodia Securities Exchange, and other sources.^[146]

Another example is the OECD SME Indicators on ASEAN. It has a lot of useful information about the topic on its website. However, data in Ms Excel format is not readily made publicly online.^[147]

5.4. Case 4: Youth Engagement in Community Development

5.4.1. Policy and Data Use on Youth Development

The 2011 National Policy on Cambodian Youth Development is the main policy on youth development in Cambodia. It seeks to equip youth with physical strength, intelligence, and necessary skills, as well as conscientiousness, ethics, and values so that they can be good citizens.

It has many strategic areas, including youth education and skills, health, employment, and volunteerism and participation. The main body coordinating and monitoring the implementation of the policy is Cambodia's Youth Development Council, with the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MOEYS) playing a leading role.^[148]

In reality, the coordination and monitoring of youth development have been persistently underperformed. The actual implementation of specific areas of youth development has been assigned to different ministries such as MOEYS (for education), Ministry of Health (for health), and Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training (for skills and employment).

Since its inception in early 2000, the Youth Development Council has had difficulty coordinating these different ministries and collecting needed data to monitor their progress. The coordination has also been challenging among development partners and NGOs working on youth issues. In addition, the engagement of semi-NGO and semi-political party groups has made the stakeholder landscape even more diverse and fragmented.^[149]


The data production and use in youth development reflect the coordination difficulties discussed above. First, it starts with the fact that the 2011 Youth Devel-

¹⁴⁶ Please visit: <https://data.adb.org/dataset/asia-small-and-medium-sized-enterprise-monitor-2021-volume-1-country-and-regional-reviews>

¹⁴⁷ Please visit: <https://www.oecd.org/southeast-asia/data/sme.htm>

¹⁴⁸ RGC (2011) National Youth Development Policy in Cambodia

¹⁴⁹ Pak (2019) Assessment of youth development policy in Cambodia.



opment Policy did not have a clear M&E framework and was therefore unclear about data is needed from the different stakeholders. Second, the capacity of the Youth Development Council Secretariat has been limited to perform one of its intended roles which are to collect data from the different ministries and agencies, store it in a database, and regularly produce updated M&E results. These tasks have not been performed, and the Secretariate is only at an early stage of developing a more reliable M&E system.

The challenge of data production and use on youth development in Cambodia was evident when the Government attempted to produce its first Youth Development Index in 2018. Youth Development Index (YDI) is a regional initiative seeking to assess and track youth development progress in the ASEAN region (see more below). It focuses on four domains, including education, health and wellbeing, employment and opportunities, and participation and engagement. For each domain, a standard list of indicators is used. According to the MOEYS officials involved in the Cambodia YDI exercise, there were many challenges when collecting data for the assignment, including difficulties in accessing data in other ministries, lack of clarity and inconsistency in data definition, etc.


As of now, one still needs to rely on surveys conducted by development partners and research institutions to understand the situation of youth in Cambodia. As the more comprehensive M&E system for youth development is still being developed, the latest data on Cambodian youth situation comes from studies conducted by non-state actors. Examples include the study on youth digital literacy and skills, youth employment, the situation of adolescence, etc.

5.4.2. An Emerging Program on Youth Volunteerism and Community Development

The Volunteering for My Community (VMC) program was started by the General Department of Youth back in 2019, first with technical support from United Nations Volunteers (UNV). From 2020 until now on, VMC has had no donor funding. Yet, it managed to expand its coverage from 12 provinces in 2019 to 18 in 2020 and to the whole country in 2021. In the program, about 15 youth are selected from each province, formed into three groups.

Each group received training on how to select, formulate and implement a community development project, which is then assessed and competed to be a champion at the year-end. In 2019, there were 36 projects implemented by about 160 youth. In 2021, it was scaled up to 85 projects implemented by about 450 youth throughout the country.

The VMC youth projects cover eight topics, including education, agriculture, and the environment (especially waste collection). Participating youths are trained



on analytical skills, data collection, teamwork, communication, resource mobilization, and presentation skills.

More recently, due to COVID-19, they have been asked to learn new digital skills, including online data search, online meetings, and online reporting. After receiving the training, the youth groups are required to write a standard project proposal for each team, using data from the Commune Database and other sources. When implementing their projects, VMC youth are encouraged to work and collaborate with local authorities, NGOs, the private sector, and line departments.

5.4.3. Relevance of ASEAN

As its general policy, ASEAN gives high priority to youth development both at the regional and member state level. To facilitate an effective policy process on the topic, ASEAN initiated the Youth Development Index (YDI) exercise to ensure more evidence-based policies on youth. The first ASEAN YDI exercise started in 2016, and the report was made available in 2017.

The region adopts an age range from 15 to 35 years old to be considered as a youth. They use five domains, namely 1) education, 2) health and wellbeing, 3) employment and opportunity, 4) participation and engagement, and 5) ASEAN Awareness, Values, and Identity. As mentioned earlier, Cambodia participated in the YDI exercise in the 2017 round and focused on the first four domains. In late 2021, it started Phase 2 of the assignment, this time focusing on the fifth domain.

[150]

In the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework, youth is given attention in all the five strategies. Examples of key initiatives and programs listed in the Implementation Plan include the promotion of youth skills, especially in digital technology, addressing the needs to migrant workers, promoting a more standard skill assessment and accreditation across the region, scholarship for young students to undertake new skills related to the post-COVID-19 situation, and attention to youth mental health, especially during the lock-down periods and economic hardships. [151]

¹⁵⁰ <https://borneobulletin.com.bn/asean-report-focusses-on-youth-awareness-values-and-identity/>

¹⁵¹ ASEAN's ACRF



6. Key Conclusions and Program Recommendations

6.1. Key Conclusions


Reflecting on the findings presented so far, the report wishes to highlight some key conclusions. The conclusions are meant as the answers to the research questions posed earlier and linked to the recommendations presented in the next section.

In terms of the post-COVID-19 development trends and recovery, a comprehensive plan has been adopted by the Government. The plan points out specific priorities sectors, including agriculture, agroindustry, tourism, garment, and non-garment industry. In addition, regional economic cooperation, digital economy, SME support, skill developments, and social protection are also high on the agenda. These priorities are well in line with those set at the ASEAN level, on which Cambodia can put more emphasis when acting as the Chairman at the 2022 Summit. These priorities also account for global and regional megatrends, especially concerning foreign investment, digital economy, data governance, social protection and labor, and climate changes.

Concerning the public policy process in Cambodia, the first task the study undertook was to define and categorize it. The study categorizes a public policy in Cambodia into long-term (3 to 5 years) and medium-term (3 years). A policy provides direction and priorities for the Government and its agencies around specific issues by specifying visions, goals, objectives, strategies, stakeholders, key actions, M&E frameworks, and financial resources. A policy needs to be operationalized with appropriate legal instruments and budgeted for. In the last five years, the MEF has been very active in designing and enforcing standard processes for budget formulation, policy implementation (mostly on budget execution), and M&E.

There have been key noticeable progress but also persistent challenges in the public policy process in Cambodia. More standard principles and procedures have been established and implemented in all the policy stages to ensure effectiveness, efficiency, transparency, accountability, and participation. The capacity of stakeholders has also been improved, especially as more young technocrats have been promoted to managerial roles. That said, key challenges remain, including cross-ministerial coordination (especially in cross-sector policies), weak linkages between policy and budget allocation, and limited M&E, especially at the impact level. The engagement from non-state actors has also been uneven, depending on the level of trust and technical capacity of those involved.

The Government has given more attention to data use in the public policy process. However, its effectiveness depends on the quality of the overall data governance system. The Government and development partners have been the biggest data producers and users. While more official data production has been produced, its quality and reliability need to improve. For instance, concerns were raised about




the need to review the completeness and reliability of key macro-economic indicators (e.g., the GDP and poverty rate) and the need for more data on vulnerable groups, especially concerning COVID-19 impacts. Even more challenging is data sharing and data use, both within the Government and between the Government and non-state actors. The Government has acknowledged this issue and planned to implement the Data User Engagement Strategy and improve its data-sharing platforms (such as the CamStat) as a response. In some countries, the challenge of data sharing and use has been addressed by having “data intermediaries” play coordinating roles.

There has been only limited engagement from non-state actors. Partly, this is due to the persistent challenges of relationship building. However, there seems to be more trust among the young generation of bureaucrats and young professionals in the non-government sector. It is also noted Cambodian researchers, especially younger ones (including females), have played more prominent roles in research institutions and think tanks in Cambodia. However, there have still not been enough opportunities and guidance for the growing number of interested young researchers in Cambodia.

Three specific technical challenges might have limited the credibility of the research work produced by non-state actors in the eyes of policymakers. The first is the lack of ‘sampling representativeness’ of those research works. This challenge relates in turn to the researchers’ lack of access to the big sample data produced by the Government and the limited use of low-cost digital platforms for data collection (see below). The second is the researchers’ lack of access to the official data produced by the Government (as mentioned earlier). Related to this, it is noted that where the data has been made available (mostly via official websites), the use of such data has also been limited. The third challenge is the lack of comparative regional perspectives, especially on the policy recommendations that those research works offer.

Local research institutions and CSOs have not fully harnessed the potential of digital platforms for collecting and accessing data. These range from the use of an open-source app such as Kobo Toolbox to collect and analyze data, online surveys such as SurveyMonkey or Google forms, chatbot, using of open-data sources (such as those offered by the World Bank, IMF, and others), and the use of citizen-generated data. To some extent, research institutions and civil society in Cambodia have already made use of these techniques. However, more training is needed to speed up and make the process more effective.

Local research institutions and CSOs have not made systematic efforts to use the insights from the ASEAN level to enrich their analysis about Cambodia. On its official website, ASEAN, especially the ASEAN Statistics Division (ASEANstats), has made a lot of data available. Similarly, other multilateral agencies such as the ADB have also compiled many useful datasets and shared them online. Cambodian researchers can use these resources to shed more light on where Cambodia is



and where it should be going. Regional comparison offers not only perspectives on problems but also solutions – proven solutions as already experienced in other regional countries. With more regional and international insights, research works produced by Cambodian researchers will have more chance of getting attention from policymakers.


A critical area that this study has not discussed enough is the engagement of the private sector and the potential of big data. This issue is currently of much interest to the Government and ASEAN. The interest and necessity will only be increasing in the years to come, thanks to the speed of digitalization. Yet, so far, there has not been any study on this important topic focusing on Cambodia using comparative and experiences from ASEAN and other countries.

6.2. Recommendations for Programmatic Considerations

The recommendations are for the Ponlok Chomnes program and other similar programs seeking to promote policy research capacity and data use in Cambodia. The Ponlok Chomnes program seeks to support and strengthen the knowledge sector's capacity and inform public policy analysis in Cambodia. Its core partners and emerging research partners have conducted various research that explores the impact of COVID-19 on multiple sectors and issues, such as education, tourism, urban development, garment, agriculture, entrepreneurial, cross-border migration, gender, social inclusions, and others. Women researchers are given particular attention under the Program. In addition, it has built partnerships with key government institutions, including the MEF, NCDD, MOP, and others.


The objective of the Program, which is to support better use of data and evidence in public policymaking, have become even more relevant to the Government's post-COVID-19 recovery plan. As the development trends become more complicated, fiscal space becomes tighter, and vulnerability has changed its nature, the Government needs better data to improve its development targeting and tracking for more efficient use of public resources. The government institutions that the Program has been engaging (i.e., the MEF, MOP, NCDD-S, and others) are also among the key stakeholders concerning public policy and data use. In addition, the increasing focus on promoting young researchers is also very relevant.

In the next step, to further improve its effectiveness and impacts, the Program should consider the following strategic and operational recommendations. Strategically, the Program should consider positioning itself more explicitly as a 'data intermediary' between the Government and non-state actors; among non-state actors; and between Cambodian researchers and those at the regional levels including ASEAN and in Australian academic institutions. The objectives should be to promote 1) trust and collaboration in research formulation, implementation, data sharing, data use, and research dissemination among these actors, and 2) regional perspectives in data analysis and adoption of new data-initiation such as big data and the use of private-intent data for development.



In line with the proposed strategic direction, the Program can consider specific operational ideas as listed below:

- **Focusing on key development issues and public policy gaps:** The Program should encourage research topics concerning post-COVID-19 recovery, with extra focus on the following aspects: 1) changing nature of vulnerability and needs of vulnerable groups such as women, youth, informal sectors, SMEs, and others, 2) the impacts of the various policy measures implemented by the Government and how they can be improved to ensure better policy-budget linkage in policy interventions.
- **Reflecting on megatrends and regional insights:** Where applicable, research works conducted by the program's partners should account for key megatrends and include insights from ASEAN and other regions. Among the key megatrends discussed in Section 2 of this report, a few are recommended that the program and its partners pay close attention. These include the COVID-19 recovery at the global and ASEAN regions, especially on regional economic integration and foreign investment, digital economy, digital government, and data governance. Equally significant trends are SMEs development, social protection, cross-border migration, and youth development.
- **Building trust and partnerships among key stakeholders:** The existing partnerships that the program has with government institutions should be further deepened. This can be done by: 1) identifying down to specific general departments and departments that the Program should work with (e.g., General Department of Policy under MEF, Policy Unit of NCDD-S, NIS under the MOP, General Department of Youth under MoEYS, etc.), and 2) supporting specific research projects involving a partnership between non-state actors with the specific general departments and departments.
- **Building capacity of individual researchers:** The Program should build research capacity for its partners and researchers from the Government agencies that it engages through the research that it supports. As with the topics for capacity building, besides the generic knowledge on the research process, new skills around data collection (e.g., online application, open data sources, citizen-generated and the need to harness existing available data both in the country and in the region should be introduced and emphasized.
- **Facilitating data collection, sharing, and use:** The Program should play a role as a hub collecting, storing, updating data from various government agencies and sources, both in Cambodia and in the region. The collected data should be made available to its research partners and the public while following any due rules and procedures. In the short term, this might involve mostly mobilizing and making good use of the already available data. Where applicable, the Program should also offer guidance on understanding and making use of the data.

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- **Advocating for more data sharing:** In line with the Government's policies, and building on its existing networks, the Program should play a more active role in advocating for increased data sharing from the Government to outside researchers. This task can be done in the context of the Data User Engagement Strategy that MOP/NIS is about to implement and other reform strategies such as the PFMRP and the NP-SNDD. In addition, the advocacy can target specific data sets such as the recent national surveys done by the NIS (the labour survey, CSES, agriculture survey, the upcoming enterprise surveys), data sources under the MEF (such as detailed budget data allocation by ministries and sub-national administrations, administrative data), data under the NCDD-S (such as the commune database), and data relating to social protection.
 - **Promoting young researchers:** As this study argues, young researchers have a lot of potential, but they need guidance and framing. The Program should encourage its partners to engage young researchers and interns in supported research projects and design research training programs tailored for young researchers, especially female researchers and those from provinces. In addition, the Program should also consider engaging and providing mentoring support to emerging youth initiatives and programs such as the Volunteer for My Community (VMC) program.
 - **Initiating new and forward-looking research topics:** While focusing on the immediate issues and technical needs, the Program should play a pioneering role by initiating new research topics around data governance and public policy. Examples include the move toward big data and the engagement of private sectors in key sectors such as tourism, agriculture, and SMEs. In initiating the new topics, the Program should also bring more perspectives from the regional levels, especially ASEAN.
 - **Establishing partnerships with regional research institutions:** Building partnerships with regional research institutions (in ASEAN and in Australia) is essential for technical capacity building and motivation, credibility enhancing, and trust-building, especially between local institutions and government agencies. TAF and DFAT, with their rich network at the ASEAN level and beyond, should act as a bridge to link local research institutions to the regional level, and initiate regional research projects, especially on the new research topics mentioned earlier.



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Annexes

Annex 1: List of Institutions of Key Informants

1. Asian Vision Institute
2. Cambodia Development Resource Institute
3. Centre for Khmer Studies
4. Centre for Policy Studies
5. DataU
6. Future forum
7. Mekong Big Data
8. Ministry of Planning
9. Ministry of Economy and Finance
10. National Committee for Democratic Development Secretariat
11. National Institute of Statistics
12. Volunteering for My Community Program
13. Yusof Ishak Institute


Annex 2: Examples of official websites with good data and/or databases

Ministries/Institutions Government agencies	Websites, DBMS, or MIS	Link	Remarks
National Institute of Statistics (NIS)	Camstat	http://camstat.nis.gov.kh/	Online platform for cross-govt data sharing on twelve sectors/themes
National Institute of Statistics (NIS)	Official website	https://www.nis.gov.kh/index.php/km/	Various national data in PDF and Ms Excel
Ministry of Planning	IDPoor	https://www.idpoor.gov.kh/	Online platform with rich raw data extractable in Ms Excel format
Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF)	Macro-economic and fiscal indicators	https://mef.gov.kh/documents-category/publication/	Regular updates on macro-economic and fiscal indicators, in PDF format
Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF)	Financial Management Information System (FMIS)	https://fmis.mef.gov.kh/	Government wide FMIS with rich data used to produce regular budget updates
National Bank of Cambodia (NBC)	Economics and monetary statistics	https://www.nbc.org.kh/english/publications/economic_and_monetary_statistics.php	Regular updates on economic and monetary statistics in PDF format
National Committee for Sub-national Democratic Development	National AWPB Database (NAD)	http://db.ncdd.gov.kh/	Links to nine databases relating to local govt and decentralization
Cambodian Rehabilitation and Development Board (CRDB)	The Cambodia ODA Database	http://odacambodia.com/	Tables extractable in Ms Excel on various donor and NGO projects.
Council for the Development of Cambodia	Cambodian Development Information	http://www.cambodiainvestment.gov.kh	Databases on Cambodia's investment but limited only to those reissued as users
Ministry of Civil Services (MCS)	Civil Servant Management Information System	http://www.mcs.gov.kh/?p=6444	Just released, not publicly accessible.
Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport	Education Management Information System (EMIS)	https://www.moey.gov.kh/index.php/en/emis.html	Rich statistical data in table formats, but only available in PDF formats
Ministry of Health	Cambodia Health Management Information System	(not available)	Not available online
Ministry of Environment	E-MoE	http://e-moe.moe.gov.kh/	Claimed to have statistics on environment sector in Cambodia, but requiring username and password.

General Department of Taxation	Tax administration and information management information system	https://www.tax.gov.kh/ueh7ogbi6/edstream/9c0d924f-off4c-4c76-9d4c-a6d8838ea8f	An internal MIS system established for tax purposes
DPS/NGOs			
United Nations Cambodia	Report Dashboard	https://un-cambodia.exploredata.report/?view=Published	Online library with updated list of various reports on Cambodia's development
UNDP	Data for Cambodia	https://www.dataforcambodia.org/	Powered by UNDP accelerator lab, with insightful dashboard on COVID-19 related development issues
The Asia Foundation	Policy pulse	https://policypulse.org/	Online updates on policy inventory, events, publications, and recent reforms
Open Development Cambodia (ODC)	ODC	https://opendevdevelopmentcambodia.net/	Online database and sharing on various topics
Center for Khmer Study	Cambodia Urban Database	https://urbandatabase.khmerstudies.org/	Compilation of high quality materials and data on urban studies in Cambodia
NGO Forum of Cambodia	Annual Budget Database	http://www.cambodianbudget.org/index.php?page=00124	National Budget in Ms Excel for selected years
Better Factory Cambodia	Transparency Database	https://betterfactories.org/transparency/	Database tracking situation of factories in Cambodia
ASEAN, Asia			
ASEAN Economic Community Department of the ASEAN Secretariat	ASEAN Statistics Division (ASEANstats)	https://www.aseanstats.org/	There are PDF report, raw file and dashboard.
ASEAN Centre for Energy	ASEAN energy statistic	https://aeds.aseanenergy.org/statistics/	Databases accessible only to government institutions from member states only (expected to be more publicly available in the future)
ASEAN IP Offices	ASEAN GI Database	http://www.asean-gidatabase.org/gidatabase/	There are PDF report, raw file.
ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund	Development of ASEAN Open Data Dictionary for ASEAN Connectivity	https://www.aseanokfund.com/our-works/development-of-asean-open-data-dictionary-for-asean-connectivity	
Think Asia/ADB/TTCP	Think Asia	https://think-asia.org/	Go to knowledge from Asia's top think tanks
Global DBMS/MIS			
International Labor Organization	ILOstat	https://ilostat ilo.org/	There are PDF report, raw file.
Asia Development Bank	Data and Statistic	https://www.adb.org/what-we-do/data/main	There are PDF report, raw file and dashboard.

Food and Agriculture Organization of UN	FAOStat	https://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#home	
Global Open Data Index	GODI Dataset	https://index.okfn.org/dataset/	
Google	Dataset Search	https://datasetsearch.research.google.com/	
International Monetary Fund	IMF Data	https://www.imf.org/en/Data	
International Monetary Fund	Dissemination Standards	https://dsbb.imf.org/dors	
Knoema	Bulletin Board (DSBB)		
Open Data Watch	Global Data	https://business.knoema.com/global-data-by-knoema/	
OpenGov Asia	Open Data Inventory	https://odin.opendatawatch.com/Data/download	
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development	Inside Information of Asia	https://opengovasia.com/about-us/	PDF reports
The Open Data Impact Map	Open Government Data	https://www.oecd.org/gov/digital-government/open-government-data.htm	
The World Bank	Open Data for Development Network (OD4D)	https://opendataimpactmap.org/index	
Transparency International	World Bank Open Data	https://data.worldbank.org/	
UN Data: A world of information	GLOBAL CORRUPTION BAROMETER	https://www.transparency.org/en/gcb	
UN Data: A world of information	Popular statistical tables, country (area) and regional profiles	http://data.un.org/	
UN Trade Statistic	Monthly Bulletin of Statistics Online	https://unstats.un.org/unsd/mbs/app/DataSearchTable.aspx	
UN: Department of Economic and Affairs	UN Comtrade Database	https://comtrade.un.org/	
UN: Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government	SDGs Indicators Database	https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/UNSDG/	
UNESCO	City Data	https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Data/City/Id/16-Phnom-Penh/dataYear/2020	
UNICEF	UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)	http://data.uis.unesco.org/	
Union of International Associations	UNICEF Dataset	https://data.unicef.org/resources/resource-type/datasets/	
	Global Civil Society Database	https://uiaa.org/vbio/	

United Nations: Department of Economic and Affairs University of California	Statistic Divisions International Government Data & Statistics	https://unstats.un.org/home/	
World Data Lab	SDGs Dataset	https://guides.lib.berkeley.edu/c.php?g=413325&p=2816629	Link to other open database
World Economic Forum	Report and White papers	https://worlddata.io/products	
World Health Organization	WHO Data	https://www.weforum.org/whitepapers	PDF reports
World Intellectual Property Organizations	IP Database	https://www.who.int/data	
World Trade Organization	WTO Stat	https://www.wipo.int/reference/en/	
World Wide Web Foundation	The Open Data Barometer	https://stats.wto.org/	
		https://opendatabarometer.org/4thedition/?_year=2016&indicator=OD8	



Ponlok Chomnes: Data and Dialogue for Development in Cambodia is a four-year initiative (2019-2023) to strengthen the capacity of the knowledge sector and inform public policy analysis and dialogue in Cambodia. In partnership with Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, The Asia Foundation is strengthening organizational and technical capacity among Cambodian research institutions and creating an enabling environment for policy dialogue.

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